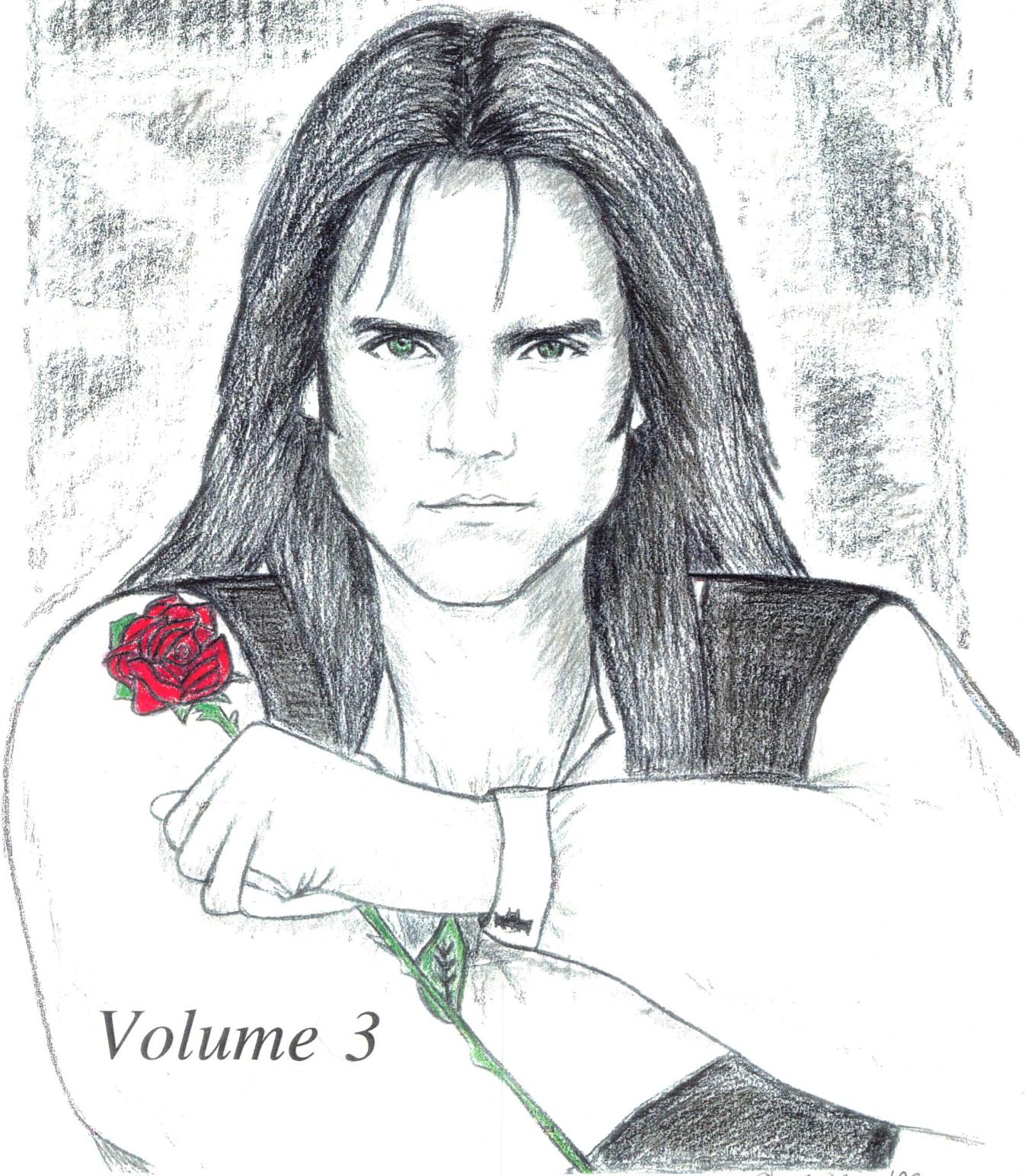
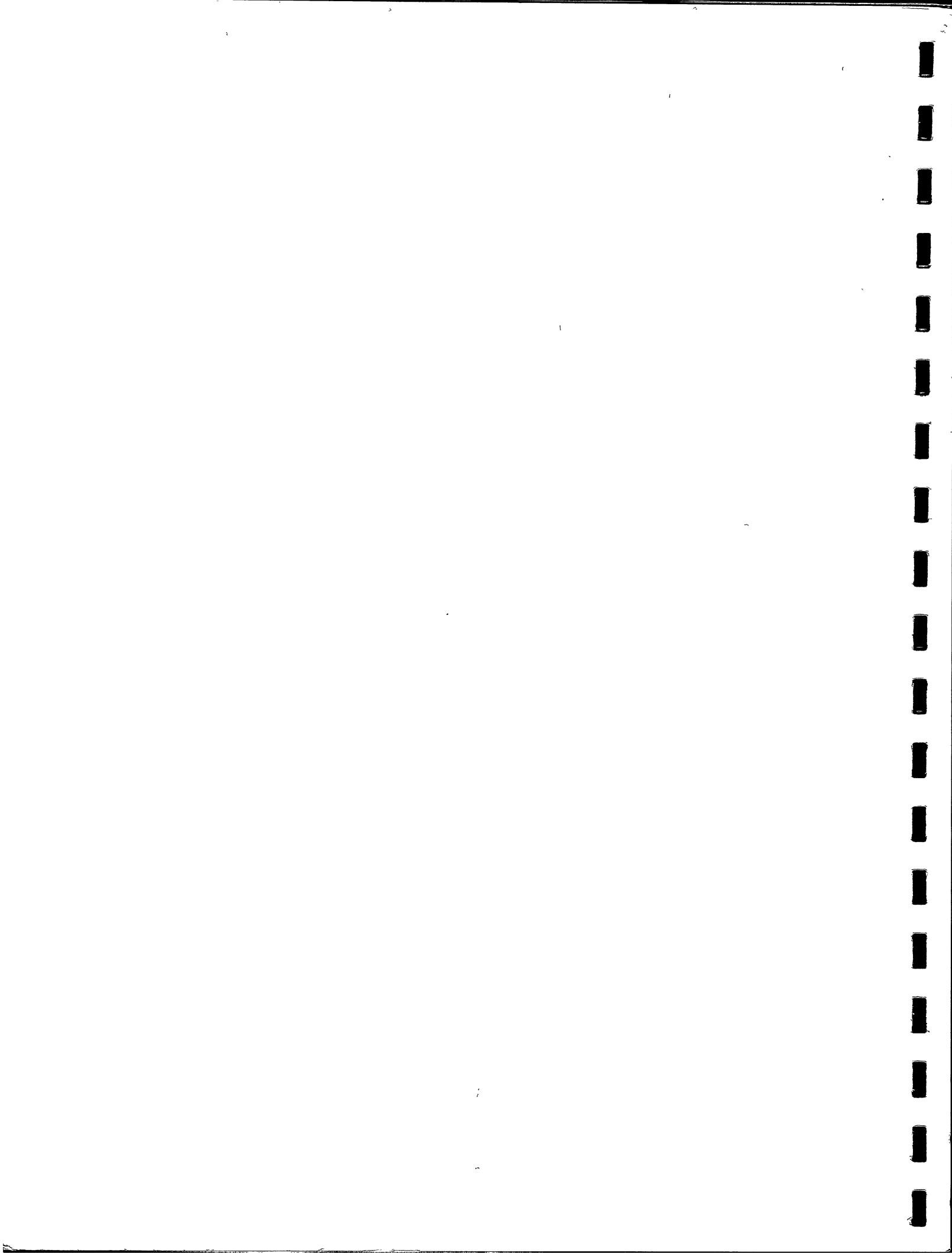


# Good Guys Wear Fangs



Volume 3

Chrestie '92



# *Good Guys Wear Fangs 3*

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FRONT COVER: Michael Praed as Max Schreck in *To Die For 2: Son of Darkness*, by Christine Haire.

BACK COVER: Nick and Natalie of *Forever Knight* caught in a winsome moment.

INTERIOR ART:

Michele West: Facing page 1, pp. 21,28,57,66.

JJ Jones: p. 90.

Denysé M. Bridger: p. 348.

Kathy Spivey: Celtic knotwork borders for poetry.

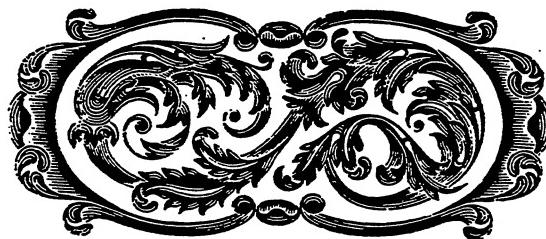
(Black line borders for poetry are computer generated by the editor. Artwork otherwise not credited is copyright-free clip art.)

TYPING: Lisa Savignano, MaryAnn McKinnon, Barbara Fish, and all the wonderful contributors who were kind enough to submit their stories on disk.

DISK CONVERSIONS: Vickie Harpe and Lisa Savignano.

UNIVERSE DESCRIPTIONS: These are by the respective authors, with some help from the editor. *Starsky and Hutch* and *Miami Vice* descriptions are reprinted from earlier editions of *Good Guys Wear Fangs*.

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May 22, 1996

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**FROM THE EDITOR**

Dear Friends,

I can't believe all the things have happened in the last three years, since the last issue of *Good Guys Wear Fangs* came out in May of 1993. *Forever Knight*, in fulfillment of all our wildest dreams, was renewed, and got not only a second season, but a third. And now, already, it is time to mourn the passing of old friends Nick and Nat, Janette and Schenke, and new friends (at least to some of us! ☺) Tracy and Vachon. Only LaCroix is left alone in the night,

And *Kindred* has come and gone just this spring, too quickly for some folks to even get around to checking it out. But hope is not gone for this show that has quickly grabbed the hearts and passions of many of us. *Write!* Snailmail is best, but if you don't have the time, email will help as well. Encourage FOX to pick it up as a mid season replacement. And write to Spelling — assure him of our support for the show and encourage *him* to seek another network or a home for the show in syndication. Addresses are:

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President of Programming  
Fox Broadcasting Company  
P.O. Box 900  
Beverly Hills, CA 90213-0900

Mr. Aaron Spelling  
Fox Broadcasting Company  
P.O. Box 900  
Beverly Hills, CA 90213-0900

email=kindred@segi-mail.com

An encouraging sign is that they continued shooting after the aired episodes were already in the can. This sounds to me as if those in charge would really like to see it picked up. Let's tell them that we care as well!

What else? This time we have *lots* of *Nick Knight* and *Forever Knight*, three-quarters of the zine by page count, including crossovers. Nick is in love in three separate stories, and we have two short and one long stories that give a *slightly* different version of the end of the series than what we saw aired. ☺ *Dilemma of Conscience*, a long story by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn, brings us back to Nicholas and Varina's world, and intertwines Nick and Nat's fate with Loukas, the one who made Nicholas Tannek's maker. This one is a love story times two couples, with some rather unexpected twists and turns along the way. Another special *Forever Knight* treat: *Deyja*, a script by Denys' M. Bridger, that was under consideration for production at the time that the series was cancelled.

We also have two *Miami Vice* tales, *Star Trek: TNG*, *Wiseguy*, *Starsky and Hutch* (two

long stories in B.N. Fish's continuing saga), *The X-Files*, and *Highlander*.

Add to the mix a nice variety of original universe tales — including professionally published authors Margaret L. Carter and Jack Summers — and you have what I hope will be quite a delightful treat!

A few housekeeping details... I already have enough material in hand for *Volume 4*, and I'm hoping to have it out for this Halloween. The deadline for submissions is September 1. As always, I am seeking fiction, poetry, and art which features "good guy" vampires — either original or media-based. Survey Results and Letters of Comment are missing this time; Volume 4 print letters of comment about both volumes 2 and 3, and provide results of the reader surveys about both volumes. So be sure to fill out the survey in the back of this issue — and keep those letters of comment coming!

As some of you may have guessed, I have fallen hook, line, and sinker for *Kindred*, and so would love to have some material based upon this show for Volume 4. All submissions are welcome. ☺ Just don't forget our other favorite fandoms! And we're missing the new *Dark Shadows* and *To Die For 2: Son of Darkness* (starring Michael Praed of *Robin of Sherwood* fame) this time. Any takers?

Hmmm... One point that I should perhaps make, for the sake of clarification. Normally, every story must have a "good guy" vampire. However, I have suspended this rule if you are writing in a universe — such as *Forever Knight* or *Kindred* — which has a mix of good and evil vampires. Thus stories about LaCroix, Divia, or Eddie Fiori would be welcome. Poems are also exempt from this rule.

Email...a subject that may one day put us zine editors out of business. But in the meantime, it certainly makes a fun toy. Drop me an email note if you would be interested in participating in a loop to discuss "good guy" vampires in books (including this one!), film, and tv. If we get enough takers, I'll see if I can find us a listserver. And as for *Kindred*... Well I am the proud listowner of a new, baby list. Email me to ask how to join. ☺

Oh, I almost forgot! I am also accepting submissions for my *Highlander* zines, *Immortal Tales* and the crossover edition of *Immortal Tales*. And the long-promised Z: THE ZORRO ZINE and TURN OF THE WHEEL 2 (*Robin of Sherwood*) have *not* been cancelled, and will be coming out before much longer.

Until next time,

*MaryAnn B. McKinnon, editor*

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## Accidents

by

### Apache

It happened right after breakfast.

It could have been life or death, could have been anything. It was pure luck I lived and came out in one piece. And, you know how they say your life flashes before your eyes? After it was over, there was only one place I wanted to go.

Only one person I wanted to see.

It was broad daylight when I got out of the taxi outside the old church. I should have been sleepy, but with the adrenaline still zinging around in my system, I felt like I'd be awake for days.

I went up the stairs and into his attic, calling, "Vachon?" It was pitch black. I keep one of those little finger flashlights in my purse, and I used it to find my way into the room without tripping on anything.

There was no sign of him, no candles burning or anything. "Vachon?" It came out in a very small voice; I was scared. I ran the thin beam of light over the couch, the chair, the covered piano, the various candelabra, a few wooden wine cases, the statue of the Virgin Mary, and then over the coffin.

My heart lurched. Oh no. Not really. No way. He can't...

I'd never asked him about it, just assumed it came with the church. Everything else about him is completely modern. He dresses, and moves, and talks like most of the guys I've dated.

I think on any other day, common sense would have prevailed. But I'd just come very close to dying, and there was only one thing I had realized I really wanted. Vachon. I was determined to find him.

I took a step or two toward the coffin, stopped, took a deep breath, and reached out my hand—

The lid crashed open and Vachon flew out. I screamed and fell backwards, taking a lot of bricabrac and some candelabra with me. My little flashlight hit the floor and threw its beam on the Virgin Mary's feet. And then he touched me—

"Trace? Trace, you OK?

A match flared and showed him looking almost anxiously into my face. Whatever he saw reassured him, because he picked up a candelabrum and lit five or six candles.

"I didn't think you'd take it so seriously." He came back to crouch next to me, smiling ironically. He was wearing a towel wrapped around his waist, and nothing else.

"You mean...you *don't*..." I couldn't say it. I just couldn't get the words "sleep in a coffin" out of my mouth, but he got it anyway.

Got it, and laughed at me. "No-o. I heard you coming."

I was just getting over gasping for breath. He helped me up, and then went around the room lighting more candles, until the place looked more normal. Well, normal for Vachon's place, meaning, back to its usual vampire movie appearance.

"Cute," I said, "very cute."

"Come sit down," he said, steering me to the sofa, "and tell your friendly neighborhood vampire why you've come calling at such an ungodly hour."

I just stared at him. Nothing could come out: not the accident, not the way his face flashed before me while the car was spinning, not the sudden not-giving-a-damn-about-the-consequences trip over here, and not the way he just scared me. He does that vampire stuff to pull my leg, but he is one. He is one.

The guy sitting over there wrapped in a bath towel with the dishevelled black hair falling around his shoulders is four hundred and ninety one years old. He spares me the gory details, but...

I don't even know if he kills people now or not. I saw him kill Vudu, but Vudu had just fired two bullets into him. He drinks that stuff out of bottles...

"Tracy." After all, I was just staring at him like a zombie. "Come on, tellll your uncle Vachon..." He was using that soft, persuasive voice that's a little bit teasing. It's one of his regular devices to charm me, and it's almost infallible. Almost. As I sat there still gaping, even that vestige of humor fell away from his expression.

He slid over next to me and took my left hand. He dropped his head low and looked up at me, deep dark eyes wide open, completely serious. Real concern. "If you want to, tell me."

How can a vampire be kind? But this is Javier...

"I almost died." It came close to being a whisper. I twisted to face him, looking right in his eyes. "Some guy...just ran a red light, totalled my car, pushed me into oncoming traffic, two other cars hit me and I was just spinning, and then a truck came and the car rolled..."

Fear flickered on his face and he leaned even closer. "But you're OK?" He ran his hands down my arms as if to check for broken bones.

I laughed. "Oh yeah, peachy. Bump-cars is my favorite ride at Disneyland." It wasn't the most convincing performance.

Now he stroked my hair. "Why'd you come here, Tracy?"

"Because..." I lifted a hand and touched his face for the first time. It was cold, like his hands are cold, but a man's face. Scratchy with stubble, dented with dimples and laugh lines, curving and rising where the lips are. His eyebrows, so thick; I backbrushed one with my thumb and it was like running your fingers the wrong way up a cat's spine. I smoothed it down again.

He was looking at me from under those brows with an expression I can't really classify. Mingled wonder, curiosity, watchfulness...and some hope. I let my hand keep going, over his finely-made lips, a small stroke for the filtrum, up the long straight ridgeline of his nose, a palm smoothed over his forehead, and then into his hair.

And he began to touch me back, running the back of his hand under the angle of my jaw, caressing the hollow of my throat with his thumb, running one hand over the outside of my blouse while the other one came up inside it, making me shiver for a second.

Javier Vachon, sixteenth century Spaniard, has no trouble with the one-handed bra technique. The thought made me smile, and he smiled back at me, a beautiful light animating his face, his brown-black eyes...

His hands came over my breasts and I pressed forward into them, savoring the moment of chill. My nipples hardened instantly under that touch: I heard his quick intake of breath, feeling them rise under his fingers.

I looked back into his eyes, dark eyes that now held no irony, only pure sexual intention. In the light of candles, with the deep shadows they throw, his face had the strength and purity of a sculpture. I leaned further into him, brushing my face along the skin and scratch of his, pressed my face into the thick soft waving cascade of his hair, my hands running over the muscles of his back, down the shallow hollow of his spine, to his hips — and terrycloth.

I said "oh" out loud, involuntarily, and he drew back a bit.

We both had that glow of discovery, like a pair of teenagers trying something forbidden.

He flashed a smile. "I put that on for you. I thought a *naked* vampire in a coffin would be just a bit too much for you to handle."

I nuzzled him. "Now you can take it off for me," I murmured. Tracy Vetter, seductress. Not hardly. I know the words, but not the music, and it sounded more like a joke than a sexy come-on.

He smiled again, a wicked teasing smile. "Everything in its own time." Then the humor fell away from his face, and the desire reappeared. *I* may not be able to do serious seductiveness, but he... I never saw such eyes. His eyes told me I was the most important, most beautiful, most wanted thing they had ever seen.

He took my face in his hands and leaned forward to me slowly, so slowly I was catching my breath with the madness of wanting the touch. I shut my eyes while his were still open and fixed on me, and his lips closed over mine.

Hot depths inside the cool skin, a core of fire... It was almost like drinking, to be kissed like that, to be taught to kiss like that, for I answered him with every depth there was to me. Depths I never knew I had, fire I never suspected myself of. I abandoned myself to that kiss like a whore; I flattened my body along his and was pushing him backward on the couch when he shifted somehow, lifting both of us and stretching us out along the sofa.

He was on top of me and I loved the weight, loved the hair that fell down and tangled with mine, loved the embrace that was wrapped around me, one arm under my back, one hand kept free above me to play with my body, then sliding down to undo my skirt, sliding down to reach between my legs; loved the muscular belly, the just-palpable ribs, the cut of his hips into mine, the slight extra pressure of an erection. He kissed me even harder now, then twisted his head to bring his mouth to my ear, and tease it, bring his tongue along the line of my jaw, to kiss my throat, to bring the soft, wide mouth over the skin of my neck...

I screamed.

The next instant I was being thrown all the way across that dark room. I hit the opposite wall hard and slid to the floor in the darkness, watching as Vachon, his eyes lurid yellow, tracked my fall with a snarl, then turned to his box of wines.

At a speed I could barely follow, he pulled a bottle out and snapped its top off with his bare hand, throwing his head back and tilting the jagged neck almost to vertical, pouring its contents straight down his throat. It seemed to take less than a second, then he snarled again and hurled the bottle aside. By the time its smashed pieces had all fallen to the floor, he had repeated the process, snapping another bottle open and draining it in seconds.

When that bottle was empty, he lowered it and after a moment, sighed deeply, long and slow. Then he stood still. Extremely still, like a sculpture again. But where before the sculpture had been a Renaissance angel, now it was a very weary man with a wine bottle held limply in his hand, its dripping mouth drooping toward the floor.

I didn't move either, just sat there in the slumped posture I'd fallen into, watching him. I didn't know what had just happened. I didn't know if I was going to live through this. I just sat there and breathed. I even did that through my mouth; it's quieter.

After a long time, moving as silently and slowly as I would if I were trying not to scare a deer, I raised my right hand to my neck. There they were: the dimples where his teeth had just begun to touch before he snapped his head back for the real strike.

So I hadn't imagined it, hadn't imagined that sound I recognized because I'd heard it just before he struck Vudu and drank. The sound just before he started purring like a tiger over his kill.

I fingered my throat again; the dents were starting to smooth out and just be a bruised area. *A vampire hickey*, I thought wildly and felt hysterical laughter welling up inside. *Don't lose it, Trace. Maybe you can still live through this.* I had no weapons, no way to oppose him.

If I was going to have to...

Almost responding to my thoughts, the statue moved. Vachon set the second broken bottle on a table, and reached into the box for a third. He pulled the cork out with his teeth, took a swig, and looked straight at me through the darkness. His eyes were still yellow.

He sighed again. "Come on out, Tracy." A calm, tired voice. "Nothing's broken, is it?"

"No bones, if that's what you mean." Anger was rising to displace the fear I'd felt. "Thanks for nothing." I stood up — maybe no broken bones, but I could feel plenty of bruises — and shook my clothes more or less into place. "Would you mind putting your eyes away?"

He blinked as if taken by surprise, but the lids opened back up over brown-black eyes.

"Thanks." I could hear the grudging note in my voice. I walked toward him, stumbling over things in the dark.

And then I just stood there, maybe two feet away from him. His eyes met mine for a moment, then looked away at who knows what. He almost never meets your eyes when he's talking to you.

The moment stretched out, and I thought of a stupid joke: "Hallmark doesn't exactly make a card for this."

"Sure it does. 'Sorry about your loss.' 'In deepest sympathy.' 'With loving memories.' " The irony was back, the mocking smile, the cool distance. Was he still going to try to kill me? What was he waiting for? Was there some way to let the sun in? He was still looking off into space.

I glared at him. "Very funny. I suppose I should know better than to trade one-liners with a guy who's had centuries to practice."

"Why did you come here, Tracy?" The tired voice again.

"You were going to *bite* me!" I was still furious.

Another long, slow sigh. And then a long, motionless silence. And then the irony lapsed from his expression, and he turned his eyes to me, and they were incredibly sad.

"I thought that was what you wanted."

For the third time, I fainted in front of Javier Vachon.

I woke up in my own apartment, on my own sofa. He was there, sitting in the easy chair.

For a moment I was delighted to see him. Then memory came flooding back and I practically jumped to a standing position. "Jesus!" I said, staring at him. I felt terror, desire, terror, relief, terror, and a strong wish that I had never ever known about anything or anyone even remotely supernatural. I have no idea how much of that he read off my face, but *his* face became an emotionless blank.

"So you wanted to play with the fire, Commissioner Vetter's daughter," he said coolly.

In my apartment, in regular incandescent light, without the spooky candles and the combination churchy-crypty air of his place, everything seemed perfectly normal. Vachon even seemed perfectly normal, slouched down in the chair with his legs crossed and his fingers interlaced.

It was night outside. "Have you been sitting here waiting for me to wake up so you could insult me?" I snapped. I waved a hand at the French doors to the balcony. "Feel free to fly away anytime."

"*You're* insulted?" The words came with a bitter laugh attached.

I frowned. "I don't get you," I said cautiously.

"You show me in every possible way that I'm the most horrible, most disgusting being you could ever imagine, and then you accuse me of *insulting* you."

A little voice inside me was saying, oh God...

He stood up and loomed over me. "If I could make you forget—"

"You can't. I won't." I'd said it before. "I don't want to." That was new, and he reacted to it. Puzzled, I thought.

"I just don't want to die, Vachon."

Now he frowned. "You thought I was going to kill you?"

My stomach lurched. "What else?"

He shook his head and made a wordless sound, looked around, and waved his arms in a big, disbelieving gesture. He looked exactly twenty five-years old. Maybe even less.

"We don't have to have this conversation," I said, getting nervous again.

But he moved forward with that incredible speed, gripped the back of my head like a clamp, and looked down into my eyes. "Don't you understand what you saw?" he said softly.

I shook my head, or tried to.

"I thought you wanted to come across," he said in the same near-whisper. "The story about the traffic accident... I thought you were telling me you didn't want to die in some stupid pointless mortal way. That you wanted my kind of life," his face tightened, "to have it with me. I was bringing you across." My mouth fell open, but I couldn't get a sound out.

"When you cried out..." He stopped. When he continued, his voice was utterly matter of fact.

"I had to feed. Right then. That's all." He let go of my head then; I practically fell over backwards. There was that rushing sound, and my living room was empty.

For once, I reacted fast. I ran to the balcony and yelled, "COME BACK HERE, YOU COWAAARRRRDD" at the top of my lungs.

And there he was. He didn't look happy, but he was there.

I smiled at him though my heart was pounding. "Call a cop a coward, you got yourself a fight. I figured the same held for conquistadors." He blinked.

"Look, you never told me where little vampires come from."

He just stood there.

"You're telling me it was an act of love."

He just stood there.

I wrapped my arms around myself. "I came to your place because I wanted to make love with you. Right then." I tried to echo his tone, but my voice was shaking like hell. "In the accident," I took a deep breath, "when the world stopped turning over and I realized I was still in one piece, all I could think of was you. I didn't feel like I needed to change my life, or join some church, or apologize to everyone I've ever been mean to...but I couldn't bear the thought of checking out without..." Now it was my turn to look around the room for nonexistent help, "... Being with you. *Knowing* you."

It made him laugh. The irony surfaced. "In the Biblical sense, Trace? A vampire?" I smiled and ducked my head.

"Not the best idea, Trace." But it was tender. Restored. He came toward me and my body didn't flinch away from him; the sense of trust — well, close-to-trust, anyway — was back in me, too. He reached out and ran his hand along my hair, and I looked right into his eyes. Deep, dark brown eyes, with the tiniest gold flecks. But they were kind of sad again, and his voice came out deep, and serious.

"Tracy—" He backed away, and bit his lower lip. "No birds. No bees. No mortals."

We just stood there and looked at each other.

"I thought you knew," he said finally.

"How would I know?" I snapped. "You didn't come with a manual..." But it was an act, and I couldn't keep it up.

"I'm sorry—"

"I'm really sorry—" We both smiled. I kept going. "What I did to you... I didn't know it could happen. Wow, did I ever not know." I shook my head, laughing, and saw his eyes follow the tossing of my hair.

"You'll just have to restrain these wild urges, Detective." He was wearing one of his regular teasing smiles.

Now it was my turn to feel sad, my turn to touch his hair one last time. "I'll live longer, huh?" I whispered.

One of his arms was around me before I knew he was moving. He held me crushed against his body, my head tilted back in his hand, and there again was the face of unmixed desire, its eyes deep, black, nearly unreadable. His mouth came down on mine in a kiss before I could react, another bottomlessly desirous, hot, liquid kiss — and I gave myself to it completely. I felt his teeth change and explored them for a moment with my tongue, then felt his tongue keeping mine away from them, avoiding even the smallest risk of a cut. We kissed like that for what could have been hours or seconds; it almost seemed to happen outside of time.

Then he let go of me, and stepped back. The yellow eyes gleamed at me almost expressionlessly, but the voice was utterly familiar. "Goodnight, Trace."

And then he was gone, and then I collapsed on my sofa, and then the phone rang and it was my Mom and Dad, full of worry, and then life started back up again...

- The End -

(Reprinted from the fkfic-l email list with permission of the author)

## ***Mortality***

*by*

***Karin Welss***

*[Editor's Note: This "Forever Not" tale was one of those written to answer the challenge on the Forever Knight email fiction list (fkfic-l@psuvm.psu.edu) of how the series could end. There were many answers to the challenge, but this one was my favorite. It is reprinted here with the author's permission.]*

Nick knew the news was good when Natalie entered his loft bearing a bouquet of flowers and a plastic grocery bag containing several quarts of gourmet ice cream. He turned off the television with a single impatient flick of the remote, then rose from the black leather sofa to face her expectantly.

The smile on her face answered his unvoiced question. When she spoke, it was only a confirmation of what her expression had already told him: "The final test results came back. It looks like the gene-splicing treatment worked, Nick. You're cured!"

His answering smile was sunlight, pure in its warmth and intensity. "No more drugs? No more injections? I'm...free?"

Natalie thrust the flowers towards him, nodding. "You're free — and you're mortal again. What are you going to do n—" Her words were cut off abruptly as Nick's arms came around her and swung her around. The flowers fell unheeded to the floor, the bouquet's bright tissue paper wrapping breaking open to scatter roses and yellow daisies across the Persian carpet.

Later, over tiramisu and coffee at Toronto's finest Italian restaurant, Natalie asked him again, "So, what now, Nick? What are you going to do with your life?"

Nick stirred the foamy dregs of his cappuccino idly with a silver-plated teaspoon. "I don't know yet, Nat. I still can't believe — can't *let* myself believe — that I'm really cured this time. There have been so many false hopes, so many disappointments..." His voice trailed off as he put down the spoon and covered her hand with his own. "And there are some other issues I need to deal with."

Natalie interlaced his fingers with her own. "The other — vampires?"

Nick nodded solemnly, and gazed off in the distance with his familiar haunted stare. Natalie knew he was blind to the expensive rice-paper collages hanging on the restaurant walls, seeing instead faces and places from his long past, friends and enemies both long-dead and undead. But when he finally spoke again, it was of his immediate mortal concerns: "I think I'll stay a detective for now. I'm still paying my debt, you know, and Schanke— Well, Schank's grown on me. I'd miss him if I...went away."

*If he went away...*

Natalie tightened her hand around his involuntarily, and Nick, with a tender smile, raised her hand to his lips. "But I've decided to stay put for a while. So, do I get to treat *you* to dinner tomorrow night, Dr. Lambert?"

She grinned impishly. "Let me check my calendar, Detective Knight. I'll have my voicemail contact your voicemail."

\*

The warehouse was old and abandoned, most of its windowpanes shattered years ago. Nick and Schanke edged cautiously around the back of the building, searching for a robbery suspect who had fled in this direction. There was a flash of movement about a hundred meters away, and Nick instinctively lunged forward.

"Nick — don't!" Schanke yelled, just before a young man brought his gun up and fired.

It was a stupid mistake. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* was the refrain chanting in Nick's ears as something hit him, hard, and sent him crumpling to the ground. His ribs were numb, but he could feel a sticky warmth cover his shirt and the tops of his jeans.

It didn't hurt.

\*

Hours passed in the hospital waiting room, marked by the imperceptible movement of clock hands on an orange-painted wall. Natalie and Schanke sat numbly waiting, barely exchanging words, but linked by joined hands. A constantly shifting honor guard of detectives and officers drifted in and out of the waiting room, taking a few minutes before a shift started or after it ended, or a lunch hour, to ensure that they were not alone. To ensure that Nick was not alone, though he might be sealed away behind metal doors and white-painted walls, draped with sterile green sheets under the merciless glow of a halogen lamp, while the surgeon, armed with a knife, needle, and thread, did his best to repair the bullet's damage.

After an eternity of entombment in air thick with the smells of burnt coffee and stale cigarettes, the doors of Life and Death opened. A fatigued doctor, clad in pale blue surgical scrubs marked with the dark spatters of Nick's blood, took a hesitant step into the waiting room.

Natalie rose stiffly, but found herself unable to speak.

"He'll live," the surgeon said wearily, answering her unspoken question. "But the bullet severed his spinal cord. I'm afraid that Detective Knight will be paralyzed from the waist down."

\*

After the doctor had made her final rounds, and the nurses had dimmed the lights, Nick lay in the narrow bed that reminded him of a monk's pallet, and stared at the random patterns on the white ceiling tiles. The hospital smells of disinfectant and despair mingled with the sweet perfume of the roses that Natalie had brought him.

Red roses, from a true heart. She had spoken to him in her direct, unsentimental way, mapping out the unexpectedly altered landscape of his mortal life. Physical therapy and exercise programs. Computer keyboards and desk jobs. Wheelchairs and a blue-painted parking space for his beloved Caddy.

Then she had kissed him, her lips pressing against his in an unspoken promise to make everything all right. She had left him alone in the bed, listening to the rapid, confident tapping of her heeled shoes receding down the tiled corridor. And he had been helpless to prevent her departure. His eyes were stinging, the dotted patterns on the ceiling tiles blurring into almost-recognizable faces and shapes. In another moment, he might disgrace himself by weeping, all of his sorrow and despair and anger running from him in a trickle of warm salt, seawater-clear, and as bitter as aloes.

There was the faintest of footfalls in his room; a hint of sandalwood-scented air stirred by motion, and the scrape of the plastic visitor's chair as it was drawn closer to his bed. Nick did not need to look at his visitor.

"What are you doing here?" Nick rasped, the involuntary tensing of his hands causing the IV needles in his wrists to bite sharply.

"Considering the woes of mortality, my son." There was a faint dusting of gold veiling LaCroix's eyes. But his attitude was one of studied indifference. He lounged in the ugly chair like a panther, long booted legs crossed casually at the ankles. "Is there something you want to ask of me?"

"No." But Nick did *want* it back, the invulnerability, the immortality. He had wanted mortality, but a mortality filled with laughter, and light, and children. Not this painful confinement to tubes and

needles; not the prospect of spending the rest of his all-too-brief years unable to walk, impotent, an object of pity. "Please."

"Please...what?" LaCroix smiled, his eyes glacial above the humorless baring of teeth. "Are you begging me to save you, or to abandon you?"

Nick was silent, his fingers knotting themselves around limp bedclothes.

LaCroix sighed, stood up, and looked down at his protégé with an expression that might have been pity. "You must choose, *mon Nicolas*," LaCroix said. "I will not choose for you. You must decide: do I bestow upon you once more the gift that you rejected, or do I abandon you to face the consequences of your folly?"

After a pause that lasted an eternity, in which he bid farewell to Natalie's wry smile, to the smell of Schanke's midnight coffee, and to Cohen's brisk ways and dry humor, Nick whispered: "Save me, LaCroix."

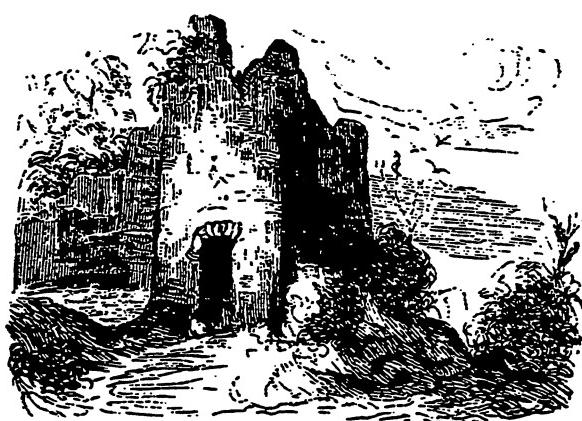
LaCroix touched Nick's hair in a triumphant caress as his eyes turned gold then deepened into scarlet.

Nick gasped as LaCroix's teeth ripped into the tender skin of his throat, overwhelmed with relief that his request would be granted, overcome with revulsion at the thought of returning to the parade of endless nights, endless years, endless darkness. He wondered how long it would be before LaCroix gave him some measure of freedom. He wondered what price LaCroix would demand for his favor. He wondered what Natalie would think, to find him vanished from the hospital.

*She would know.*

Somewhere in the red-black haze that clouded his return voyage from mortality to vampirism, he heard Janette's voice echoing in his memory, sweet and infinitely regretful: *Say goodbye to the Light, Nicolas.*

- The End -



## **VAMPIRE EYES**

*by Robin M. White*

*...Pierce the misty veil of the soul  
shattering pale illusions of eternity.*

*...Haunt the silky velvet glow of night  
seeing through civilized realities.*

*...Lust for the yellow glare of sunlight  
enduring the glow of midnight's moon.*

*...Burn with a hunger of sensual light  
glowing with inner blazing fires.*

*...Ignite white-hot passions of man  
weeping for the crystal pain of life.*

*...Drink greedily of life's nectar  
tasting infinity in each drop.*

## *A Chance Encounter*

*by*

*Janet Dornhoff*

*[Author's note: This scene was originally the start of a longer story, but after Tessa's death, I reworked the story without her. Still, I see no reason to let a perfectly good scene just sit on a disk gathering dust. So, here is a brief encounter between two major supporting characters. Thanks to whoever it was that pointed out that Nick's and Duncan's birthdays would have to be pretty close together for finally convincing me to finish this.]*

*[Editor's note: A wonderful, little tale in its own right. Enjoy!]*

Natalie juggled her shopping basket further into the crook of her left arm as she reached for another card with her right. It was bad enough trying to find just the right card for a co-worker, but to find one that was right for Nick was almost impossible! Especially since she'd probably be giving it to him at work. Otherwise, she'd have raided the leftover Halloween cards.

Another woman brushed past Natalie, nearly upsetting the precariously balanced basket. Natalie made a grab for it, the card falling to the floor. The other woman turned at Natalie's gasp, and together they managed to save the basket from toppling over.

"Excuse me," the other woman said, smiling apologetically. There was a definite accent to her voice. She was tall, and elegant, and very beautiful. Natalie was suddenly aware of how baggy and rumpled her sweater and sweatpants were after a long day at the office. She was sure she must still smell of formaldehyde, and not the classy perfume carried her way by the store's ventilation system.

"Hey," Natalie smiled back, "Serves me right for taking up the whole aisle." The other woman retrieved the card, which Natalie returned to the rack immediately. The cartoon was cute, but it wasn't Nick.

"No, I should have been watching where I was going," the other woman said, searching through her stylishly tiny purse. "Pardon me, but do you have a pen I could borrow for a moment?" She held up her own card, one definitely not designed for a co-worker. Natalie sighed inwardly, wondering if she'd ever have anyone to buy cards like that for. *Maybe when I start looking like that*, she thought. She handed her basket to the woman while she fished around in her monster of a purse. *Notebook, gloves, lipstick I never use, bottle of...what is that? Ah-ha, a pen!* Natalie traded the pen for her basket and turned back to the card rack. She finally settled on a card with a generic, non-threatening birthday greeting, which happened to have a bouquet of daisies in the picture. Nick would get it, but the rest of the office wouldn't. Natalie started towards the checkout before remembering her pen.

The woman had added a note to the bottom of the card, in an elegant, graceful cursive. *Tessa*, Natalie thought, *Even her name has class*. Tessa had also added a "1" after the giant "40" on the cover of the card.

"Thank you," Tessa smiled, handing the pen back to Natalie.

"No problem. Hey, you forgot to cross out the '0' when you added the '1'!" Natalie offered the pen back again.

"So I did," Tessa replied, an odd little smile on her face. She made no attempt to take the pen back. Natalie watched the woman heading towards the check-out counter.

*Forty-one? Four-hundred-and-one?* she thought. She almost followed the woman, to ask her about this, then thought again. *Just an honest mistake, surely.* She glanced back at the rack, wondering briefly whether she could find an eight or eighty card to give Nick later, in private. Sighing, she stuck her card into the basket and began searching for her checkbook and car keys as she headed for the registers. The other woman, Tessa, was already in the other line.

Natalie looked at her sideways as they waited. *The accent was French, real French, Paris, maybe. Isn't that where Nick said he was...brought across?* She snorted at her own silliness. *Yeah, right, Lambert. You just happen to bump into a vampire's girlfriend grocery shopping.*

Thanks to knowing which of the check-out girls was fastest, Natalie wound up leaving the store only a few steps behind Tessa. As she blinked in the bright sunlight, her eyes slow to adjust after working so many night shifts, a convertible pulled up in front of the store. The driver, a gorgeous man with a long leather jacket and black hair tied up in a pony tail, swung the door open for Tessa. Tessa handed him the card as she got in, and he laughed, a hearty, delighted, surprised laugh, as he read it. They kissed, with the ease and familiarity of long-time lovers.

Natalie blushed at her own overactive imagination. *Some vampire*, she thought, as he slid on a pair of designer sunglasses and turned to check behind him before pulling out. Her stare must have caught his attention, because suddenly he was looking right at her. Natalie flushed and turned away quickly. *Forty-one*, she thought, as she turned the corner back to her apartment and an impatiently waiting Sydney. *A very attractive forty-one.*

Tessa followed Duncan's distracted gaze, recognizing the woman from the store walking the other direction.

"Duncan? Do you know her?"

"I don't think so. It's just..." He trailed off. There had been something about her expression, something familiar. He wondered, briefly, what it was. Then he shrugged. He kissed Tessa again lightly, pulling away from the curb. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. They would only be in town a couple of days, and Duncan planned on seeing how much of Toronto had changed since his last visit.

- The End -

(reprinted from the *fkfic-l* and *hlfic-l* email lists with permission of the author)



## *The Corner Booth*

*by*

*Jack Summers*

Dana Struthers eased the pale blue Thunderbird between a Chevy van and a Buick Regal in the rear parking lot of the Hillcrest Motel. The spring night was warm, and she had the front windows down.

She switched off the engine and sat quietly, oblivious to the sound of the trucks roaring down the interstate that paralleled the side of the motel. She felt giddy and short of breath. The excitement of seeing him threatened to consume her, as it always did.

With a deep sigh, she flicked on the dome light and checked her makeup in the mirror on the back of the sun visor. Her hair was short, thick, and she kept it in a pixie cut that framed a well-tanned face, dominated by expressive, brown eyes with long, curling lashes. A regal nose crested full lips over straight, polished teeth and gave her a handsome, wholesome look. She looked younger than forty-two.

She carefully scanned the parking lot. There were no familiar cars. She walked swiftly to the back door of the motel and started down the corridor toward the cocktail lounge. Leonard was home with the boys. He was always suspicious when she went out alone. She had to be careful.

She passed a long mirror on the wall of the hallway, and her vanity dictated a glance at the reflection. It pleased her. Her figure was full, well rounded in the appropriate places and without an extra ounce of fat. She smoothed her skirt with sweating palms and walked into the lounge.

The usual Monday night crowd was there. Two businessmen sat drinking whiskey doubles and bemoaning a slow day on the road. Another, smiling like a circling shark, hovered over a brassy, bleached, middle-aged smoker, whose once obvious beauty had dissolved into sags and wrinkles.

Four women, with name badges plastered to their lapels, chattered like magpies about the day's meeting. A young couple sat opposite each other making dreamy eyes over popcorn and beer.

The salesmen paused long enough to examine her like a prized steer. She smiled to herself at the compliment and the futility of their attention. She looked toward the booth in the back corner.

It was tucked to the right of an elevated section beside the dance floor, a step above the main level. An etched glass partition separated it from its neighbor, affording a measure of privacy unavailable in the rest of the booths. From the doorway, it looked empty.

That was the beauty of this particular booth. Once safely behind the partition, no one who walked in the door could see into it. She knew it wasn't empty.

Walking quickly across the smoke-filled room, she stopped by the partition and smiled down at him. "Hi, Johnnie. I love you."

"I love you, too, Darling," Johnnie Wise smiled back.

*Damn him*, she thought with a smile. In the twenty years they had been together, he never seemed to get any older. His blonde hair was cropped so close to his head that he looked nearly bald. Intense blue eyes twinkled with mischief, and his boyish smile was captivating.

He stood up and let her slide into the darkened corner of the booth out of sight of the door. The rest of the world ceased to be as he slipped a powerful arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. She closed her eyes and surrendered to the pure, burning ecstasy of their first kiss. It was always the same. The first kiss was always special.

"How long do I have you for tonight?" A sweet smile creased his lips, now red with her lipstick. The love light gleamed in his eyes, but his voice was tinged with sadness.

She clutched his arm tightly against her. "About an hour, Honey. Robbie has to go to a baseball game, and I have to drop him off. Maybe an hour and fifteen minutes if I hurry home."

He sighed with resignation and kissed her gently again. She floated with the feeling of his warm, sensuous mouth against hers. She opened hers gladly and let his familiar tongue trail across her lips. She felt herself drifting. The voice of the waitress snapped her back to reality.

"Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes. I'll have a vodka and soda with a lime." Johnnie never drank anything.

She drained a third of the glass and set it down in front of her. "You look wonderful, Johnnie." Her voice was husky with emotion.

"And you are the most beautiful, enchanting creature God ever created. Try as I might, I'll never understand why you chose to fall in love with me." He smiled that warm, captivating smile at her again.

"Honey!" Holding his cheeks in her hands, she kissed him tenderly on the lips. "You're so kind to me; so patient. I'm not sure why you put up with this crazy situation."

"Because, Baby, I know in my heart that you will never be mine. I know that seeing you here, like this, is all I can ever have. An hour with you is better than lifetime with anyone else. If this is all I can have, I'll take it."

She pulled away and felt the tears rush to her eyes and threaten to spill over. "Johnnie, you know I don't want it this way, either. If it were just me, if I were the only one I had to think of, I would come to you. Now, I just can't. There is nothing in this world I want more than to be with you. There's the boys."

"And Leonard."

"Him, too, I guess. He's not a bad man, but he's not you. I'm not sure what he would do if I left. I don't know if he could handle the boys alone. I don't want to hurt him, and I don't want to be unfair to you. I love you." This time, the tears escaped.

"Honey, stop it. We've been through this a dozen times. I know how things are. I've learned to accept the possible and to stop expecting the impossible. Let's not spend the few precious moments we have together moaning about what might have been."

He pulled her face toward his and gently licked the tears from her cheek. The effect was electric. God, how he loved her! She could see the caring, the warmth, the gentleness in his eyes. She could feel the love in his strong hands as they held her tenderly. He loved her with all his heart. She knew it beyond any doubt.

She closed her eyes and put her head on his shoulder. Neither of them spoke. They didn't have to. She breathed in the heavy aroma of his English Leather. She felt the rough cotton jacket against her cheek. Her senses were so keen she could feel the individual threads of the coarse weave. When she was with him, every sight, sound and smell left its impression.

She heard the gravely voice of Frank Sinatra from the speakers as he crooned about doing it his way. Glasses clinked across the room. The smell of popcorn wafted from somewhere. A woman laughed. The pulse at the side of his throat beat a steady rhythm against her forehead. She drifted on the peaceful waves of the magical feeling. She didn't care what the consequences might be. She was his woman. She loved him the same way he loved her. Theirs was a love that would last as long as either of them lived.

Dana broke the spell and glanced at her watch. As usual, the hour was gone. She kissed him with frantic passion. Once more tears wet her cheeks.

"Damn it Johnnie, why does reality always have to force its way back in? Why don't I have the courage to come to you? I want to. I could. Why can't I be selfish just once in my life? All I have to do is leave them and come to you. Why can't I? I love you so much. Why?"

He kissed her softly on the lips. "Because, my Darling, you're you. That's why. You made a commitment to them. They're the number one priority in your life. They always will be. They'll always need you. I understand that. It doesn't change the way I feel. You know I'll always be here for you.

Whenever you need me, I'll be here."

Dana smiled and hugged him tightly. She could touch the love that hung in the air. She knew he meant it. He *would* always be there.

"When will I see you again?"

"Leonard has a poker party a week from Tuesday. I could be here by seven."

"I'll be here, waiting."

"Let me get the drinks." She dropped five dollars on the table by the check, kissed him quickly on the forehead, slipped out of the booth and made for the door before she changed her mind. She glanced back over her shoulder. She couldn't see him, but she knew he was watching her. She could feel it.

Johnnie was part of her. He always would be. She delivered Robbie to the game, mediated a dispute between the other two boys and sent them both to their rooms. She ironed a pile of shirts and poured herself a stiff vodka and soda and dropped in a wedge of lime. She sat brooding on the family room sofa. Johnnie's smile haunted her.

Leonard snored from his easy chair, a copy of *Field and Stream* open on his chest. She couldn't bear to look at him. She still felt Johnnie's lips, his touch. They lingered tantalizingly at the edges of her memory.

Depression overwhelmed her. They would fall apart without her. Wouldn't they? They needed her. Didn't they? Johnnie needed her, too. He was only twenty-three when they met and fell in love. He had grown up in an orphanage near Chicago. He went to college on a scholarship and got his business degree. He built his whole life around her. She was all he had. Why didn't she have the courage to go to him? It was where she wanted to be.

She slipped quietly up the stairs to her bedroom. She opened the door to her closet and turned on the light. She pulled the bottom shoe box from the stack of boxes on the floor in the rear corner of the closet. Tears ran freely down her cheeks as she lovingly opened it.

The purple, heart-shaped medal, trimmed in gold with the bust of George Washington mocked her. She lifted the yellowing paper from beneath it. With loving hands, she gently unfolded it.

She removed the worn picture of a soldier in jungle fatigues. His bright blue eyes and mischievous, boyish grin smiled back at her. She hugged the picture to her breast as she re-read the faded, twenty year old letter. Her body shook with sobs. There were no more tears to shed.

*We regret to inform you that your fiance, Lt. John Wise, was killed as a result of hostile fire near the city of Dakto, Republic of Viet Nam. John died bravely in defense of his country. His final act of courage saved the lives of the other members of his patrol when he smothered a hand grenade with his own body. No greater love has a man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. May God grant you comfort in your loss.*

She kissed the boy in the picture tenderly and replaced it in the box. When she had first gotten the telegram twenty-five years ago, she had felt as if her world would end. It was the kind of telegram that they always sent to families, and since she was all that Johnnie had, they had sent it to her. A brief note from Johnnie's commanding officer, Colonel Talbot, had accompanied it, telling her that due to the ferocity of the battle, that Johnnie's body was never recovered. It Colonel Talbot only knew the truth.

When John had first appeared to her a month after the telegram had arrived, she had fainted. After he had revived her, she couldn't believe that he was there. It was a miracle. Then, he had told her the truth. As he lay dying on the battlefield, it had come to him. She remembered the look on his face as he told her the story.

"The pain was unbearable," he said, his pale skin reflecting in the light of the flickering candle on the table. "I prayed for death. When I saw him, I thought my prayers had been answered. He was a tall, thin man with a wolfish face, but he had kind eyes. When he told me that he could take away my pain, I believed him."

"I felt his lips upon my neck, and as my hammering heart slowed, then beat in time with his, I floated

on waves of the most peaceful feelings that I have ever experienced. I'm sure that I was near death when I heard the other voices, and he was gone."

"It was a young corpsman. He pumped plasma into my veins as fast as he could and when he saw my eyes flicker, he murmured words of encouragement. Little did he know that I was already dead...or undead. In fact, neither did I."

The expression on his face, the pain in his eyes, told her that he sometimes wished that it had ended there, in that far away rice paddy.

"When they got me back to the hospital, I lay rigid, and when they couldn't feel a pulse, they put me with the other dead from the fire fight."

"By the time I had enough strength to get up, my wounds were starting to heal. As I left the make-shift morgue, he came to me again. He was apologetic and he told me what he had done."

"My name is Amos Marsh. I am a vampire," he said simply. It is unimportant whether you believe me or not. Time will show you it is the truth. The fringes of war are a good place for my kind to linger. We stop so much pain. Here...we attract less attention. Unfortunately for you, since I was unable to totally drain your blood before we were interrupted, you are now one of the gifted."

The explanation had been so incredible. Johnnie had told her about the endless nights, the thirst, the need for blood. It had been weeks before she had believed him. Now, she knew it was all true. He had offered her a place beside him in the endless night, but she had so many responsibilities. Others depended on her. Someday! Someday she would go to him. Till then, she would be content with the joy and the pain to be found at the corner booth of the Hillcrest Motel.

- The End -

*[Tales of the Marsh Hollow vampires appeared in both **Good Guys Wear Fangs 1** and **2**. Caleb — April Marsh's older brother in "Night Call" (GGWF2) — is now the title character in his own novel, and it's coming this September from Northwest Publishing of Salt Lake City. Congratulations, Jack!]*



## Night Moves

by

Tammy L. Croft

It was one of those dark, wet, foggy San Francisco nights the city is so famous for. You know the type; sounds are either crystal clear and carry for miles or they can't be heard five feet away. And as for sight, forget it. Most folks around here wouldn't be able to see the proverbial hand in front of their faces, and even I was having trouble. My night vision's good but, it couldn't cope with *this*. Which was good reason for staying indoors. But there was no way I could; plain restlessness I thought at first, but Isis felt it, too, and I knew I wasn't picking it up from her. So, we took to the streets.

I stayed on the sidewalk where the light would do me some good, but Isis disappeared into the alleys, keeping pace with me, only God and she knew how; I've never been able to figure out just how that cat does half the things she does. Maybe that's why she sensed the fight before I did.

Four punks from a gang called the Bloods against a lone man in his thirties. Not a contest, really, though he was holding his own for the moment. He was using karate like an expert, and the Bloods weren't sure how to handle it.

Isis acted first, sinking four clawed feet into the biggest one's face. A thirty pound Abyssinian is heavier than you'd think, and that one had real trouble on his hands; Isis is a game fighter.

The lone fighter was quick off the mark; Isis was just getting settled for the tussle when he tried to kick the lanky Blood's kidneys through the wall. I took care of the stocky one the way Daddy taught me: from the ground up. By the time I hit his belt the last one was long gone.

"Thanks," their intended victim said as we dumped the Bloods in the mouth of the alley. "I couldn't have handled all of them alone. The name's John Lonetree."

"Vikki Madison." We shook hands and I studied him in the halo of the streetlight. Amerindian as the name suggested; not a big guy, but he carried himself well. I knew all he could see was a shadow against the fog, which was just as well; I've picked up more than my fair share of scars as a PI. "I take it you're new in town?"

"Just got in tonight," he answered, matching my stride. "I'm not even sure of where to look for a place to stay. You have any suggestions?"

"Why don't you spend the night with me?" I answered, feeling the hunger coil in my belly. His nearness was driving me nuts. I can survive a while on meat and such, but I knew I'd have to really feed soon, and I didn't want it to be one of the dream feedings I'd had for longer than I cared to think about. Some of us say they're good, but I've never found it so. God help me, I wanted him as a man, to accept who and what I am. But it didn't seem likely; Native Americans have a very low tolerance for demons and others of that ilk.

I unlocked the door to my place, letting Isis in ahead of us and slipped out of my coat, hanging it on the coatrack to drip off the fog. Johnny hung his there, too, and kissed the back of my neck as he hugged me from behind, a hug that felt only too brief.

His eyes met mine then, dark hungry eyes in a fine-boned face touched with dusky rose. He kissed me gently, his touch fanning my hunger; the need in my eyes must certainly have been matching the need I saw in his. Something Justin had said once came back to me; Justin found it amusing. I could see his

hazel eyes still as he traced the curve of my hip, telling me how beautiful I looked. Maybe he was right; I certainly hoped he was right about Native American sexuality.

Yeah, Justin was right. It took us half an hour to get upstairs, what with messing around and tripping over Isis and trying to help each other — the kind of help that really wasn't, but was a lot of fun anyway, especially getting undressed. Oh, God, he smelled good; all sagebrush and leather and woodsmoke. And he knew how to treat a lady. I mean he started with my ears and went from there. Yeah, he was good all right; almost as good as me — except... I couldn't get a rise out of him. He was totally dead there, and for the life of me I couldn't figure out why. He wasn't a tease; at least there were too many other signs that he wanted me for that to be it, and I didn't think he was impotent. There was just *nothing*. But after a few minutes of his skill, I forgot about that and gave myself up to pure sensation.

Then, when the moment was right, I set my lips to the pulse in his neck and bit deep, the warm flow of his blood almost more than I could bear; it almost overwhelmed the pain in my neck as he, too, bit deep.

Slowly, reluctantly, we withdrew from that sweetness and looked at each other in dawning awareness, then began to laugh like idiots. The odds of two of our kind finding each other were just short of impossible, but we had and the situation bordered on farce.

"The hell with it," he growled and put his lips back to my throat as his hand disappeared between my legs. I moaned and set my lips to the wound in his throat, letting the fire on my tongue join the fire in my loins as the moment went on and on.

They say it's sweeter when both parties are Undead; I only know that it was one of the best for me. The feeding went on and on, as good as the sex, maybe better since it was integral to what I was feeling. Finally sated, we separated and held each other, enjoying the afterglow as we struggled to absorb the implications of what we had done.

"Oh, God," Johnny whispered, "What did we do to each other?"

"I'm not sure," I answered, laying my right arm across his chest. "This kind of feeding's addictive."

"But what a high," he sighed, slipping his arms around me and letting his hands roam. "I've never felt anything like it."

There it was again, that odd naivete that sometimes seemed to surround him. I sat up on one elbow and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "Johnny, how old are you?"

"Well, I was born in '53..." he began, and I waved the rest away.

"I mean, how long ago did you change?"

"That was in 1970, just after I shipped out to Vietnam." His voice was softer now, troubled by memories. I closed my eyes, trying to drown my own horrors in more pleasant times. I was forty years older, but some things would never change, and I knew we were both carrying around too much emotional baggage that should have been dumped a long time ago. But for many reasons, neither of us had bothered, and now there was a good chance that neither of us could handle it alone. I had to make the first move; Johnny had drawn so deeply into himself that I wasn't sure he could connect with me. But I had to try.

"I'll never forget the day I changed," I began quietly, rolling onto my back to stare at the ceiling, letting it all unfold in my mind so I could pick out the right words to describe it. "I'd been working on the Simmons case for days and I didn't think I was going anywhere. But I was making Simmons nervous and he sent some of his goons after me. The one, Marco Lengram, no, Lougram, was a real son of a bitch. They had orders to bring me in alive, but he wanted to have a little fun first, so he worked me over and then got careless. I got away from them and Lougram got pissed off and started shooting wild. I got hit. The bullet entered here," and I touched the hinge on the left side of my jaw, "and took the top of my head off. Justin had told me ten years before that I would be changed, so I was kinda prepared. I'm just lucky that they let me be. If they'd dumped me in the bay..." I shrugged and didn't finish the thought. "I found out later that they were supposed to keep me alive, but Lougram told Simmons that I'd tried to jump them and it was the only way he could stop me. That little number earned him a bullet between the eyes. Simmons was rather shocked to find me in his office three days later."

Johnny laughed. "I can just imagine his reaction."

"They say you can't kill a dead man twice. Well, Simmons tried. He died in the state mental hospital five years ago."

Johnny shook his head as he traced the curve of my hip to my waist; his touch feather light, his hands as soft as chamois leather. "I dunno, but a lot of people just can't accept what we are. It's funny, but everybody in my unit knew our C.O. was but me. And I'm the one he changed." His hands shook as he lightly traced the line of scars up his chest. "I still have nightmares about it."

His hand was cold as Arctic ice under mine and shook as though palsy had set in with a vengeance. "Sometimes it helps to talk, Johnny," I told him.

He sighed then, a long low sigh that barely touched my cheek. "We'd been out on patrol for over a week when we stumbled into this VC stronghold. It was a hellish fight; we weren't prepared to take on that many and they weren't expecting to be found. There was a lot of confusion, a lot of wild fighting. The VC lost half their men in the fighting, the other half when we called in an air strike. It's funny, but I was the only one injured on our side, and I didn't realize I'd been hit until we were on our way back to base." His soft voice broke and he stared at the ceiling, his eyes fixed on a memory over a decade in the past. "We were almost to one of those old temples when I collapsed and they carried me inside. The medic couldn't stop the bleeding and our CO waved him aside. It's strange but there's days I can still feel the blood in my lungs. I'd lost so much, but I was still conscious and everything had such clarity that it was eerie. I could feel the eagle's wings at my back; I was that close to dying. But Braxton, that's my CO, wouldn't let me. He said he'd seen too many deaths. Anyway, he took his K-bar, that's the combat knife we carried, and opened a vein in his chest. Then he picked me up like he was picking up a baby and held me to that wound. I was so weak I couldn't drink, but a little trickled down my throat and I guess it was enough. A little later he opened the wound again and had me drink. I think he was just being sure.

"We were holed up there three days and when we left all I had was these," and he touched the row of scars. "Braxton told me that there was a lot I had to learn, but he never got a chance to teach me. Our next time out, he hit a land mine and I've been on my own since."

I laid my head on his chest and trailed my arm across his waist, his cool flesh warming my soul. We were both loners, but it didn't have to be. There was more than enough room in my life for a lover and Johnny couldn't survive on his own much longer. I propped my chin on my hands and looked into his liquid dark eyes. "You ever considered teaming up with someone?"

Johnny laughed. "I've never been in one place long enough to even think about it. Why? What do you have in mind?"

"Welll, this place is really too big for just Isis and me and I could use a partner in the agency. What do you think?"

"Don't I need a P.I.'s license?"

I shrugged. "I could put you on the payroll as a researcher until you qualify for a license."

"All right, let's try it."

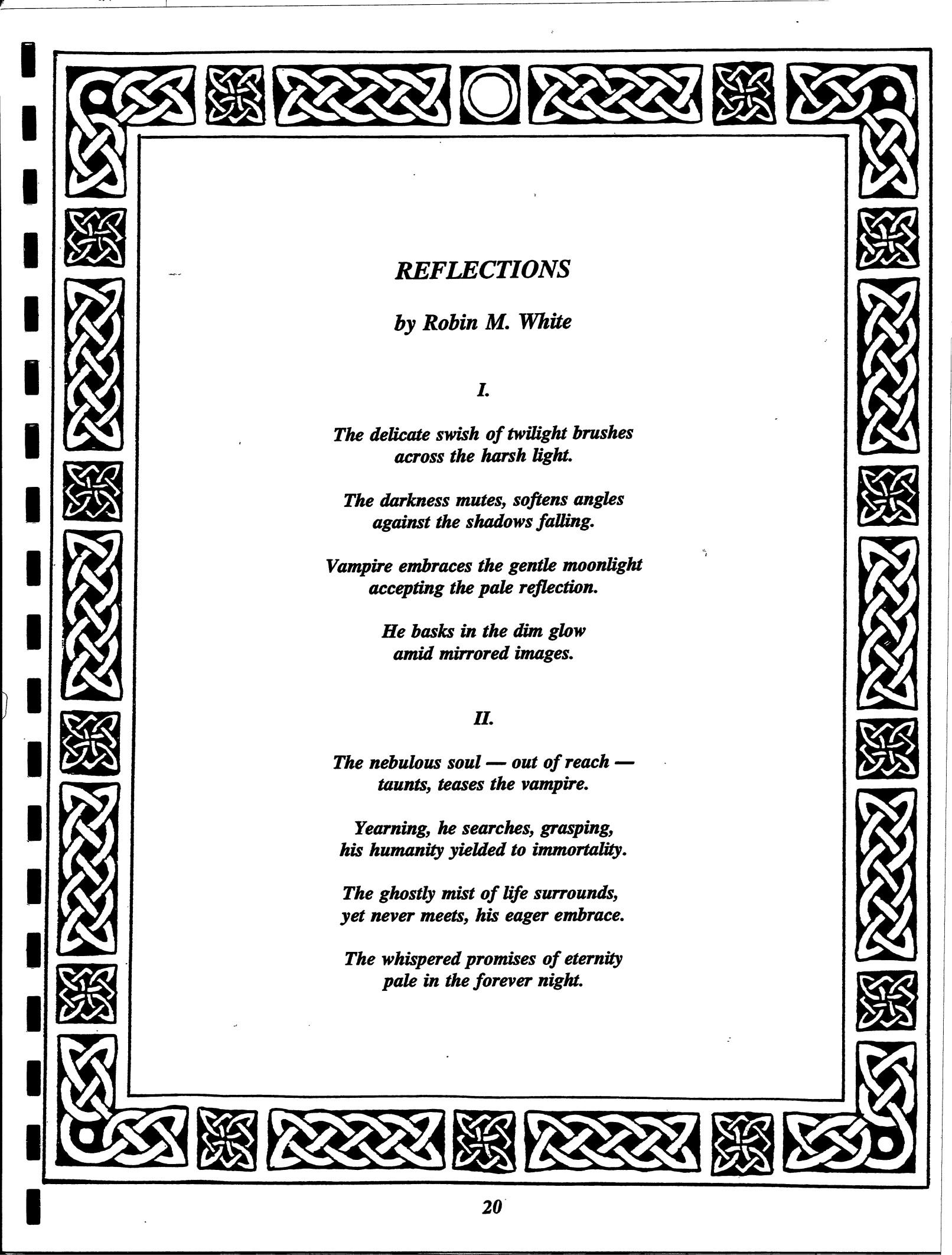
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It's going on six years now, and there's no regrets for either of us. Sure, we've both had our share of outside affairs but the rest is so good, so *right*, that I doubt we'll ever be apart.

Johnny's a full-fledged PI now, and Madison-Lonetree is the biggest agency on the West Coast, plus, it's one of the ten biggest worldwide. Naturally, a lot of our clients are our own Blood. Maybe someday we'll be able to admit what we are — when the world's ready for us. But that's a long time in the future, and maybe never. But I can hope.

I never thought I would find a man I'd want around for a while, but Johnny... All I can say is that it's a good thing there's centuries ahead of us to grow in. 'Cause right now it looks like we're gonna need 'em.

-The End-



## REFLECTIONS

by Robin M. White

### I.

*The delicate swish of twilight brushes  
across the harsh light.*

*The darkness mutes, softens angles  
against the shadows falling.*

*Vampire embraces the gentle moonlight  
accepting the pale reflection.*

*He basks in the dim glow  
amid mirrored images.*

### II.

*The nebulous soul — out of reach —  
taunts, teases the vampire.*

*Yearning, he searches, grasping,  
his humanity yielded to immortality.*

*The ghostly mist of life surrounds,  
yet never meets, his eager embrace.*

*The whispered promises of eternity  
pale in the forever night.*



## Dilemma of Conscience

by

Diana Smith and Pat Dunn

[Some of you may remember Nicholas and Varina. Now meet Loukas — the one who made Nicholas's maker. One point to note: This tale was written before Nick Knight knew that his maker was still alive. But this story is not just about Loukas and his lady — it's also about Nick and Nat, and hopefully a happier ending than "the powers that be" chose to give us.]

Frustrated by his unproductive interview with Stonetree, Nick Knight stormed into his flat and threw his jacket carelessly on the floor. He nearly yanked the refrigerator door off its hinges and viciously slammed it shut after snatching one of the detestable bottles. Cork between his teeth, he turned and froze at the sight of a dark-haired, dark-eyed man sitting on his sofa. "You!"

"It has been a long time, Nick," the visitor said calmly, a wry smile on his handsome face. "What has it been — six hundred years?"

"More or less," Nick said, spitting out the cork. "How did you get in?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

Nick raised an eyebrow and sat on the arm of his easy chair. "I suppose not. I do, however, want to know how you found me and why."

"The how is easy enough. You recently attended the opening of a gallery—"

"Ah, Varina, of course," Nick said, taking a sip from the bottle he still held. "She saw my picture in the paper, and it was easy enough for her to track me down. But why you, and why now?"

"She told me why you disappeared from my château after such a brief time of instruction, returning to the dark life. I see that you *have* learned that killing is not necessary," the visitor said, nodding at the bottle in Nick's hand. "And you have become what Varina calls a modern-day knight, a defender of justice and good. It would seem she was right in her estimation of you." The man sat back, steepled forefingers touching his lips as he gave Nick a deeply scrutinizing look.

Nick smiled wryly and stood up. "I'm glad you approve, Loukas, but you shouldn't pay too much attention to what Varina says — she always was too trusting of people." He looked down at the bottle he held, then set it on the counter and reached for a cabinet above it. "I'm sorry, I'm being a terrible host. Can I offer you a drink?"

Loukas raised a dark eyebrow, then smiled. "Why not?" He waited until Nick brought him a goblet and sat in a chair across from the sofa. "This is a plain goblet."

Nick's eyes narrowed as he looked across the goblet rim at Loukas Alexandre. "Were you expecting gold and jewels?" he asked, his voice dangerously calm.

"Nothing that fancy," Loukas smiled, sipping the ruby liquid. "Perhaps something more — primitive?"

"Nick? I heard that Stonetree reamed you out — Oh, I'm sorry," Natalie said as she burst into the living room, chestnut curls flying in wild disarray.

"Nat, this is an old...friend of mine," Nick said after a moment's hesitation. "Loukas Alexandre, Natalie Lambert."

Loukas was on his feet, sweeping Natalie off hers. "Charmed," he murmured, brushing her hand

with his lips. The old-fashioned gesture should have looked ridiculous but somehow Nat found it endearing.

"Nice to meet you," she said, looking at his face and finding herself gazing into a pair of intense, dark brown eyes. Nick's visitor was aristocratically-featured, a high forehead rising from an aquiline nose above sensual lips. "Uh, I didn't know you had company, Nick."

"Neither did I," he said ironically.

"I took the liberty of dropping by, since I had the opportunity," Loukas said, releasing Nat's hand with a slight nod. "I dislike telephoning, and I *did* want to surprise him."

"Which you did," Nick admitted, as he joined them at the doorway, vaguely disconcerted by how popular he seemed to be this morning. "Nat, I appreciate your concern, but I don't think Stonetree said anything to me today that I haven't heard before. He's getting pressure from the mayor on this serial murder case, and had to let off steam on somebody. Schanke and I were handy, that's all."

"Stonetree?"

"Captain Stonetree, Nick's boss," Natalie supplied. "Oh yes, I brought you this, Nick."

Nick grimaced at the brown paper bag she thrust at him. "Another of your witch's brews, Nat?"

"Witch?"

"Figuratively speaking," Nick assured Loukas. "Nat's a criminal pathologist."

"Centuries ago, she'd have been burned at the stake for possessing such knowledge. Of course, there was a time when studying anatomy was illegal," Loukas said, motioning for Natalie to sit on the couch. As she walked ahead of him, he glanced at Nick and in a low voice murmured, "Yours?"

Nick recoiled at the notion. "Nat's a friend, a very good friend, and that's all."

"Ah. Good." Loukas smiled and joined Natalie on the sofa.

Nick stood for a moment, frowning at the scenario before him.

"So, you're an old friend of Nick's," Natalie was saying when Nick dropped into the chair closest to her. "How old?"

White teeth flashed in the handsome face as Loukas laughed at her bluntness. "Perhaps you should ask Nick." He watched as she picked up his goblet and studied the contents, making no move to stop her when he realized Nick was not exhibiting signs of concern.

"What was it, Loukas — 1350?" Nick asked, taking the goblet from Nat and setting it on the table before leaning back in his chair to watch the expressions dancing across Natalie's face.

"About then, I believe. Or perhaps a year or so earlier — it's so hard to keep track of the years after so many centuries."

"I see. So you're a vampire, too," she said with a small laugh. Her glance fell on the identical goblet set before Nick and she frowned at him. "Drink your protein shake, Nick."

"Later," he said, having little desire to display his usual nausea in front of Loukas. Catching his guest's questioning glance, he explained, "Nat is trying to find a cure for my condition."

Loukas looked from one to the other with evident surprise. "So the rumors are correct, Nick. You really are trying to cross back over."

"You have a problem with that?" Natalie challenged, narrowed gaze on Loukas.

He flashed a charming, reassuring smile. "I don't, but I believe *he* does. Once Changed, it is not easily undone. In fact, I know of very few who have ever succeeded. Usually, those who tire of our life seek an ultimate end."

"Erica," Nick said flatly, looking at the antique doll on his mantelpiece, an ever-present reminder of his former lover's suicide.

Natalie touched a hand to his knee, a sympathetic look in her eyes. He gave her a wry smile, then returned his attention to Loukas.

"I have heard of your search for the goblet — and your loss." Loukas paused and it was then Nick realized the elder vampire had left Alyce Hunter's book on the floor beside the sofa.

"Well, you win some and you lose some," Nick shrugged off carelessly.

"I have come to offer my help — if you are still interested," Loukas said, picking up the book and flipping it open to the picture of Nick. "But I am not certain you are aware of all that this method entails."

"You can help Nick? Why would you? — LaCroix sabotaged him at every turn," Natalie pointed out.

"Well, I am not LaCroix," Loukas answered. He met Nick's eyes and said, "Perhaps you and I really should discuss this later."

"I can take a hint," Natalie said after a moment, when Nick did not reply. She stood up, and both men rose to their feet. "I suppose you two have a lot to get caught up on, and it's high time I got out of here and let Nick sleep. I'll see you tonight, Nick."

"Sure."

Loukas said, "May I escort you to your car, Dr. Lambert?"

She stopped short at that, and turned to look at him skeptically. "That's kind of you, Mr. Alexandre, but it *is* daylight out there now."

"I know."

She blinked. "Sunlight doesn't bother you?"

"It's uncomfortable, of course, and prolonged exposure can be dangerous, but after a while, one can develop a tolerance for it."

Natalie's scientific mind was already digesting that. "A tolerance? But if Nick doesn't have a tolerance after seven hundred years... Just how long do you mean by 'a while', anyway?"

Before Loukas could reply, Nick grinned and clapped a hand on each of their shoulders. "Trust me, Nat, you really don't want to know! Anyway, 'tolerance' has nothing to do with it. Things just don't work the same for him as for me."

Natalie wasn't put off the track. "I'd really like to get a sample of your blood, Mr. Alexandre, and maybe some tissue samples, too..."

"Natalie!" groaned Nick. "Don't—"

"But it could be very useful to compare them with the ones I've taken from you, Nick. After all," she said, smiling, "you're the only vampire I know."

Loukas interjected smoothly, "I would be delighted to discuss the possibilities with you over dinner. Or perhaps we could attend the theatre or a concert?"

"Well, I don't know," she demurred, as he opened the door for her. "Maybe—"

Nick's grin faded as he watched them leave the apartment. A vague uneasiness tugged at him, and he wondered why. Loukas Alexandre could be trusted not to hurt Nat, and it wasn't as if he had asked permission to...to what?

He turned away restlessly, paced to the coffee table and picked up the bag containing the covered plastic cup. He pried the cover off and sniffed at the contents, then tried a mouthful.

It was worse than usual, and Nick headed quickly for the kitchen sink. He was still bent over it when Loukas came back into the apartment.

"I hope it's Dr. Lambert's concoction and not my presence that's the cause," Loukas said, sniffing cautiously at the cup Nick had set on the counter. "What is the purpose of this?"

"Part of Nat's theory," Nick said curtly, wiping his mouth. He took the cup from Loukas and poured the yellowish contents down the drain, running water to flush all traces of the stuff away. "She's trying to find me an artificial substitute for the nutrients available in blood, that's all." He rinsed the cup out and left it to drain, then shut off the tap water. "At least this time she didn't bring me a hamburger!"

Loukas smiled, but his expression was serious. "Nick, these efforts of yours are admirable, but—"

"You didn't come here to congratulate me on my lifestyle choice," Nick interrupted. "What do you want, Loukas? What's all this about the Mayan goblet?"

Loukas studied him, then said, "There were three such artifacts in existence, two in private collections. One was the one you found on the first expedition, was it not?"

Nick shrugged, his attention fixed on the older vampire.

"The second was recently acquired by the city's museum. The third..." Loukas smiled, and withdrew a cloth-wrapped object from his coat pocket, "is here. I was the other collector, you see." He unwrapped the stone cup, displaying it. "If you can borrow or otherwise obtain the museum's cup, then I am willing to allow you to use this one as well, for the ceremony."

Nick stared at the jade artifact, then took it from Loukas' hand to examine it better. It was identical in every detail to the two other Mayan cups he had seen. The grinning carvings of fanged creatures seemed to mock him.

"I gave mine to the museum, after LaCroix smashed the stolen one," he said slowly. "Not that anyone knows it was mine. I might be able to get it back..." The cup felt unexpectedly warm in his palm, almost as if it was a living thing. He set it down abruptly and looked at Loukas. "Why are you offering this? Why not simply use it yourself?"

"I am happy with what I am," Loukas shrugged. "I came to terms with this Life long ago, and there are aspects of the ritual I cannot embrace. You must decide for yourself if you're willing to pay the price."

"Price?"

Instead of answering, Loukas had another question. "What do you know of the ceremony?"

"The high priest pours the sacrificial blood back and forth between the cups before it is drunk by the vampire wishing the change," Nick replied, eyeing Loukas suspiciously.

"And from where does this blood come?"

Absolute silence followed Loukas' quietly spoken question.

Nick fingered the goblet, refusing to meet the older vampire's gaze.

"This is not a matter to take lightly. Consider all it means, and be very sure," Loukas said, placing his hand on Nick's shoulder. "Just keep in mind that this is one time where animal blood will *not* suffice."

"Where are you going?" Nick asked, jerked out of his thoughts when Loukas opened the front door.

"To my hotel. I shall be in touch," Loukas said with a smile.

"I hope so," Nick retorted, relief and irritation lacing his tone. "You can't just drop this in my lap and walk away, Loukas!"

"I don't intend to," his friend promised. "But you need to think this out without my interference. And I must get some rest before meeting Dr. Lambert for an early supper this afternoon."

Nick's head came up at that, and he glowered at the closing door before picking up the black remote control and reactivating the security system with a vicious jab of a button.

He used the control to lower the roller blinds, securely blocking out the rays of the sun, then picked up the jade cup. He considered hurling it against the wall, but settled for wrapping it in the cloth Loukas had left and placing it in the wooden chest that had once held his own cup.

With a deep sigh, Nick went up the staircase and flung himself down on his bed. Hands under his head, he stared at the loft's ceiling, turning over the hour's events in his mind.

He supposed he'd known about the necessity of a sacrificial victim for the ritual, but hadn't wanted to face the reality of it. After one cup had been smashed in the confrontation with LaCroix, Nick had put the whole idea out of his mind. It wasn't possible without two cups, and that was an end of the matter.

Until now.

Now he had salvation temptingly within his grasp. But at what cost? Having foresworn killing, now he had to kill to become mortal.

And what was Loukas really up to, showing up now and offering his so-called assistance? Was he hoping to replace LaCroix, become the new master? He couldn't be as altruistic as he appeared; there had to be more to this entire situation. Or was he after Natalie?

Nick's eyes narrowed as he studied the ceiling where he saw memories vividly played out as if on a movie screen.

*"You do not have to kill to share life," Loukas said, standing before the fireplace in his château's main hall, his hands clasped behind his back. "Blood taken in terror, with death, offers little sustenance. That is why you must feed so often, and so deeply. Taken with pleasure, you need only indulge once a week or so, and then only as much as would fill a goblet."*

*Nick stared at him in disbelief. "You believe this?"*

*"I live this, as do those of my Blood," Loukas assured him calmly. "I have not killed in centuries*

— at least, not for sustenance," he amended. He looked at the door and motioned for the serving wench to enter. She gave her master a shy smile as she came forward to stand in front of him. "Solange, this is my guest, Nicholas Chevalier. He has need of your...talents."

"Yes, sir," she said, her eyes cast demurely downward.

Nick looked at the girl and then at Loukas, a trace of long-forgotten chivalry making him uncomfortable with these developments. After all, LaCroix had given him his first kill, a girl not much older than this one... "No!" he blurted. "That is not necessary, M'sieur Alexandre." He met Loukas' eyes and added, "It is not a good idea."

"I think it is an excellent idea," Loukas contradicted, dark eyes narrowed. "Solange is quite willing, I assure you."

"No."

"Ah, fear, I see. Then Solange and I shall demonstrate, shall we? Perhaps you need detailed instructions?"

Nick drew himself up, his dignity wrapped around him like a tattered cloak. "Yes, I do fear, and I think you know why! It's not possible for—" He broke off, glanced at Solange, finished, "She's innocent. Leave her out of whatever game you're playing with me." Trembling, he turned away, waiting for the other vampire's wrath to fall upon him.

"Go, Solange," murmured Loukas quietly, and Nick heard her quick footsteps crossing to the doorway.

He flinched as Loukas put one hand on his shoulder. "I am not your master, Chevalier, and this is not a game. It's a way for you to live by sharing life, not by killing. Have you taken nourishment from anyone who was willing to share it with you?"

Nick shook his head, not looking at him.

"It is a worthwhile experience."

"I...can't," the younger vampire whispered. "I can't be with a mortal woman and not kill her! I've...tried."

"Ah. And no doubt you have waited until you were nearly mad with bloodlust? Trying to prove you could do without?" Loukas took Nick's face in his hands and forced him to meet his eyes. "It will take time and a great deal of patience, but you can overcome LaCroix's influence. Killing does not have to be a way of life."

The ringing of the phone jerked Nick from his reverie. He listened to the recorded spiel and the voice that began to leave a message. He snatched up the receiver. "Nat? Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay," she replied, sounding entirely too cheerful. "Nick, I couldn't believe it! He stood right there in the sun, next to my car and *nothing happened*. No smoke, not even a wince. It was incredible — and the possibilities — he's agreed to give samples and answer any questions. Nick, this could be the breakthrough we're looking for!"

"Don't get your hopes up, Nat—"

"I'll need fresh samples from you as well," she continued, ignoring his warning. "Listen, I've got to go. I want to get some sleep before Loukas sends his car for me. Can you believe it? Me, Natalie Lambert, being picked up in a limo, for cripes' sake. He even asked what I'd like so he could have the hotel kitchens prepare it. Unreal, Nick."

"Yeah," he said, his voice hollow, "unreal." He rubbed his forehead and added lightly, "Yeah, that's great, Nat! Uh, you have a good time—" He winced at his own words and tried, "I mean, enjoy yourself." He massaged his temples and went on, "Just don't get your hopes up unreasonably, okay?"

"Why don't you try being a little optimistic?" she chided before hanging up.

"I gave up optimism eight hundred years ago," he muttered as he dropped the receiver in its cradle. "Hotel kitchen? Welcome to my parlor," he snarled, throwing himself on his bed.

He punched his pillow, turned on his side and closed his eyes, determined to get some sleep. But he was troubled by a nagging unease about Loukas' real motives. Just *why* had he come back, now, with the cup?

And what was he going to do with Natalie?

Nick pushed away the immediate answer which came to his mind, punched his defenseless pillow again and turned onto his other side.

It was past noon before Nick drifted into a restless sleep peopled with confused dreams of Loukas, Natalie, the murder victims, Stonetree's ranting, and LACROIX's expression as he let the jade cup fall and turned his attention to Alyce.

"No!" Nick bolted upright in bed, breathing heavily. A glance at the clock told him that Natalie had been at Loukas' hotel for some time. He dressed for work, snagged a bottle from the refrigerator and stared at it for a moment before savagely yanking the cork and tipping back the bottle. He despised himself for giving in to the craving, for being weak.

Was Natalie disgusted by his weakness, or was she drawn to it? He'd been so wrapped up in keeping an emotional distance to protect Nat that he hadn't bothered to consider *her* feelings. They were just friends, weren't they? He was only feeling friendly concern for her, knowing how hard it was to resist a vampire's lure, wasn't he?

He prowled around, arguing with himself until he could no longer stand it. Dragging on his black coat, he hurried to his car and drove straight to Loukas' hotel. He hesitated before the door to the vampire's suite, then banged imperiously on the door.

His eyes flared when a bare-chested Loukas opened the door.

"Nick — what a surprise," Loukas said, not at all discommoded by his visitor. "Natalie's just washing up."

Nick pushed his way past the elder vampire, gaze darting around the room. Natalie's coat was tossed over the sofa, her shoes looked as if she'd kicked them off in a hurry.

Nick's head turned toward the bathroom door as the running water stopped. After a moment, he looked at Loukas, who was now shrugging into his shirt. "You don't waste any time, do you?" he asked, his voice deadly calm.

Loukas blinked. "Nick—"

Natalie appeared in the bathroom door, wiping her hands on a towel. "Oh good, you're here, Nick!"

He turned and looked her up and down as she padded across the carpet in her stocking feet. She was fully dressed, except for the discarded heels, which wasn't too surprising, knowing her penchant for comfort. He opened his mouth to greet her and was prevented by Nat's cheerful admonition, "Take off your shirt!"

Nick stared in astonishment. "My...shirt?" He glanced at Loukas in horror, wondering just *what* had been going on in here.

Natalie intercepted the look and her hands fisted on her hips. "And just what does *that* mean? Did you think Loukas and I — not that it's any of your business if we did. I'm a big girl, Nick, and I don't have to get your permission to go out. It might surprise you, but I *am* a woman and there are a few men out there who have noticed. So why don't you pack up your big brother attitude and go to work? I'm not interested in your superior male vampire act."

Nick took a step back as she advanced on him, then forced himself to stand his ground before her anger. "Nat, I'm sorry, but it was just—"

"What?!" she snapped.

"Never mind," he retorted, raising his hands. "I made a mistake coming here, that's obvious. I should have known you'd be too busy being a scientist to pay any attention to your experimental subject!" He turned his back on her outraged face, shook off Loukas' restraining hand, and stormed out of the room.

"You shouldn't be too angry at him," Loukas said softly, coming up behind her and placing his hands on her shoulders. "He cares a great deal for you, more than he will admit to himself."

"What do *you* know about it?" Natalie demanded, struggling to catalog the emotions raging through her.

"I know you're a lovely, intelligent young woman," Loukas said, gentle pressure on her shoulders turning her to face him. "I know you are a very loyal friend of Nick's, and I know how much he values

your friendship and trust. He is facing a difficult decision, and you play a major part in it."

"You mean changing back?" Natalie said, realizing his shirt hung open. His broad chest was beautifully muscled and her fingers itched to caress him. He had ceased to be an interesting specimen of scientific curiosity and was now a fascinating specimen of sensuality.

"He's on the right path," Loukas said, his dark eyes riveting hers. "He has begun to reclaim the humanity LaCroix stripped from him so many centuries ago. However, I doubt he'll find the mortality he seeks."

"But the cup — the ceremony," Natalie pointed out, giving in to the temptation and sliding her hands across his bare chest.

"Enough talk," Loukas said, gently kissing the corner of her mouth and then drawing back. "Do you wish for me to call the limo?"

He was giving her a chance to back out, dignity intact. Somehow, Natalie knew that if she accepted the ride, refusing Loukas, he would not force her. "Later," she whispered, supple fingers kneading his chest muscles.

"Very well," he smiled, lowering his head to kiss her lightly on the lips. "You have nothing to fear, Natalie."

"I'm not afraid," she said, as his fingers caressed the curve of her cheek and fleetingly rested on the pulsepoint of her throat.

"Good," Loukas murmured, as he swept Natalie into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

\*

Nick stalked into the squad room, scarcely noting Schanke as his partner fell in step beside him. "Hey, Knight, what's eating you? You're not still uptight over what Stonetree said, are you?"

"If we don't get a break on this case soon, you and I are both going to be looking for new jobs," Nick told him.

"Nah, Stonetree wouldn't do *that*," Schanke said. He thought it over and qualified, "Would he?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," Nick said, mischief gleaming in his deep blue eyes. "Anything new on the case?"

Schanke pulled out his notebook and flipped through the dog-eared pages. "Our prime suspect isn't so prime. He was found with about a half-pound of lead in his chest."

"Damn!" Just what he needed — more complications.

"Where are you going?"

"See what Nat has for us," Nick called over his shoulder.

The head bent over the autopsy table was definitely not Nat's. "She called in and took the night off," Dr. Chang told Nick when the detective demanded to know her whereabouts.

"Sick? Nat's sick?"

"Don't think so," Chang shrugged, returning his attention to the corpse. "She just took the night off."

"I see." Nick frowned abstractedly at the sheet-draped body, noting the bloody wounds in the man's chest. "Shotgun blast?"

"At close range," Chang nodded. "Does it every time." He plucked out another bullet from the chest cavity and dropped it into a basin. "You can read all about it in my report, Detective."

"Right," Nick sighed. Dr. Chang wasn't as tolerant of kibitzers in his autopsy room as Natalie was. "Thanks."

He went back to his desk and attacked the paperwork stacked there, doing his best to ignore a nagging speculation about Nat. It wasn't like her to take time off from the job. She was the original workaholic... But maybe she had gotten so involved in analyzing those samples that she hadn't wanted to be distracted tonight...

\*



There was no question that Natalie was being distracted. She was lying in Loukas' bed, senses reeling deliciously as he caressed every inch of her body with his incredible hands and lips. She couldn't have strung two sentences together if her life depended on it — two words would have been a challenge.

Never in her wildest erotic fantasies had she ever imagined this. Loukas was worshipping her body, treating it with such tender skill that she thought she'd scream.

It was only after she lay limply in his arms that she recalled the flash of pain in her neck at the moment of her climax.

Loukas hauled her up in his arms and her head rested on his bare chest. Drawing her legs up against his, she frowned.

"You still have your trousers on," she said, shifting her head to look up at him.

"Your pleasure is my pleasure," he answered, one finger stroking her face from temple to jaw line.

"But you—"

"I am not as mortal men, nor is Nick, and you would do well to remember that in your dealings with us," Loukas said warningly. "As desperately as Nick wishes to be human, he is still a vampire. I know you care for him, and he you, but never forget his true nature."

"Vampires," Natalie murmured, touching the side of her neck where he had kissed her. "I don't understand why things are so different for you, Loukas. Nick can't tolerate the slightest bit of sun, yet you walk around in broad daylight. He burns his hand if he touches a crucifix, but you've got one around your neck... Why?"

Loukas was silent, then said, "Nick would tell you it is because he is damned. He still believes that, I think."

"And you don't?"

"I was born in a different age," Loukas said cryptically. "It is difficult to outgrow the beliefs of one's upbringing. Nick has many challenges facing him." He lifted her hand to his lips, caressed the tips of her fingers. "As you do, if you remain firm in your intent to stand by him."

"Why wouldn't I? Nick is my friend," Natalie said, frowning at Loukas.

"As I thought," he said softly, smiling at her defensive tone. "Come, it's late and I should see you safely home."

"Since I work the night shift, I'm used to being up at this hour," Natalie pointed out, sitting up and looking around for her clothes. "And secondly, I'm not some helpless twit who can't get home by herself."

"Natalie."

Something in his tone made her pause as she scrambled on the floor for her underwear.

"You must remember I come from a different background than the men you've known," he said, finding the elusive panties and handing them to her. "A gentleman sees his lady home. It allows for a few more minutes together and a chance to say good-night one more time."

Natalie snatched the scrap of lace from him, then turned her back as she hurriedly pulled her dress over her head. She wadded up the bra and panties, shoved the garments in her purse and stepped into her heels.

"I didn't mean to upset you, my dear. If you feel I've used you and am now discarding you, then I am sorry. It was never my intent," Loukas said, watching as she shoved the wild curls out of her face. "If you are regretting our shared passion—"

"I don't want to analyze it — I just want to go home," Natalie snapped, irritated with both Loukas and herself.

"As you command," Loukas said agreeably, producing her coat and holding it out for her. "Shall we go?"

"Go?"

"You wish to go home, and I am your servant," Loukas said by way of explanation.

"Your driver — "

"May have picked you up, but I shall drive you home. He has either retired by now, or is entertaining. Knowing MacKenzie, probably both. Either way, his off-duty hours are his own. I do know

how to drive and in fact, am quite skilled, so you needn't worry about your safety. I was one of Nero's champion charioteers."

Natalie had turned her back during the earlier part of his speech, allowing him to help her on with her coat. Now she whirled to face him, disbelief in her eyes. "Emperor Nero? The Romans — ?"

Loukas merely nodded, amusement twitching at the corner of his mouth.

Natalie closed her mouth, becoming aware it was open, and laughed nervously. "Silly question. Of course it was. All right, you can drive me home."

"My pleasure."

Conflicting emotions and a myriad of thoughts warred through Natalie's mind as she sat quietly in the car. A part of her mind noted he was indeed an excellent driver. Still in a befuddled state of mind, she allowed him to walk her to the door.

He took her key from her and opened the door, and then stood aside to allow her to pass him. Pressing the key in her hand, he tilted her head back with his other hand. "Good night, lovely Natalie. Sleep well." With that, he lightly kissed her lips and disappeared in the shadows.

Clutching the ring of keys, Natalie stared after him and then carefully closed her door.

The shadows shielded another figure.

Nick's fists had clenched when Loukas kissed Natalie good night. He had seen the side of Nat's neck clearly in the light glowing above the open doorway, and there was no mistaking the two dark blotches against the pale skin.

With a half-uttered snarl, Nick leapt into the air, following the trail of Loukas' car.

Loukas unlocked his hotel room door and entered, pausing with key in hand, his attention drawn to the billowing curtain before the balcony. He closed the door and stepped forward, halting as he caught sight of the figure sitting in the chair facing him. "Nick?"

"Good morning, Loukas."

"Is something wrong?"

The blonde man raised his head, eyes cold. "Why don't you tell me, Loukas?" His voice was calm, deceptively so. "Nat took the night off. She didn't answer her phone. Would you like to explain why not?" He glanced meaningfully at the disarrayed bedclothes, then quirked an eyebrow. "She took some blood samples from you, and *you* took some from her, is that it?"

"I fear I don't understand your resentment, Nick. You made it quite clear that your relationship with the lovely Natalie was not an intimate one and she had no objections—" He broke off as Nick stood up suddenly, knocking the chair over behind him.

"Did she really know what you were doing, or did you compel her?"

"She was in full control," Loukas assured him.

"Perhaps seduction would be a better word," Nick said, advancing on Loukas. "When a vampire turns on the charm, no mortal is safe."

"Safe? I would never hurt Dr. Lambert," Loukas protested.

"Define 'hurt'. I have purposely kept an emotional distance to protect Nat. You breeze in, disrupt her life and mine. When I first met you, you had nearly ruined the lives of a couple who were supposedly your friends. I nearly killed Varina Thanos because she was a perfect victim — despondent to the point of self-destruction. And all because *you* decided she and Nicholas Tannek couldn't be together. You have set yourself up as an omnipotent being, interfering based on what you have decided is the best course. I don't think I want your help and I don't want you near Natalie." Nick paused, inches from Loukas, then looked him up and down with unconcealed contempt. "Did you really believe you could control *me* through her?!"

"No! Nick, you know you are your own master — especially now."

"Do I?"

"Yes! Nick, I'm sorry. I did not intend to upset you like this. You know you can trust me—"

Nick pinned Loukas' gaze and said venomously, "Trust you! I trusted you, Loukas Alexandre. You were the only vampire I'd ever met who treated me like I was still some sort of a human being, as

if I still had dignity... You were my *friend*. I went back to LaCroix to protect you. And now you betray me like this—"

"Betrayal? Nick, I came here to help you, not betray you. I regret the error in judgement, but you must realize that Natalie is an incredible woman. I did ask your permission—"

"*My permission!*" Nick laughed harshly. "That's a good one. 'Welcome to town, Loukas. No, I don't mind if you snack on my friends!' Who's next — Schanke? No, better not — he eats raw garlic to build up his blood." Nick grinned humorlessly, exposing his fangs, and seized the elder vampire's shirt front. "I'm withdrawing my permission. Stay away from Nat, all right?"

"All right, Nick," Loukas said evenly, making no resistance.

Nick studied him, then nodded. "Good." He shoved Loukas backwards, watching impassively as the other vampire stumbled against the door. "I'll be watching you, Loukas." He turned and crossed to the open balcony door.

"Nick, my offer still stands. I will help you with your ceremony, if you wish to go through with it. But be very, very certain you are prepared to accept all it entails."

"I don't think I want to pay your price," Nick sneered.

"It's not *my* price that should be your worry. There is a higher power, Nicholas Knight," Loukas said with warning in his tone. "Close the door as you leave. An open door is an open invitation."

Nick stared at Loukas, bemusement knitting his brows, then turned and went out onto the balcony, where the lightening eastern sky made him pause and fish his sunglasses out of his coat pocket. He put them on, glanced at the sliding glass door, then at Loukas.

Deliberately, Nick turned his back, climbed to the balcony railing and leaped into the air.

With a sigh, Loukas crossed the room and closed the glass door, then pulled the drapes shut against the coming dawn. Hadn't he learned his lesson about interfering when he nearly destroyed Nicholas and Varina?

\*

Natalie rolled over in bed, moaned and pulled the pillow over her head. Instead of her usual bounce-out-of-bed enthusiasm, lethargy claimed her limbs. Stumbling to the bathroom, she stood half-asleep under the shower spray.

Hair wrapped in a fluffy yellow towel, Nat stood in front of the mirror and made a face at her reflection. "What on earth did he see in you?" she asked disgustedly, pulling at her eyelids. "Not too bloodshot... blood," she whispered, touching the tiny marks on her throat.

"Oh...my...god...."

She sat down hard on the edge of the tub, staring blindly at the wall.

It was true: Loukas Alexandre was a vampire, and he had used her like she was a walking blood bank. Of course, if she was completely honest, he hadn't made her feel like that. In fact, he'd made her feel pretty damn good.

He had asked her and she didn't think he'd hypnotized her into complying. She was pretty sure she'd agreed of her own free will.

"Damn my scientific curiosity," she muttered, rousing herself to the routine of dressing for work. She tried covering the marks with makeup, but that only drew more attention to them, so in the end she washed the area gently and settled for wearing a silk scarf.

For some reason, she didn't want Nick to see them. After his scene earlier, she doubted Nick would be very happy to see that his suspicions were right all along.

\*

"Maggie!"

"Are you going to invite me in, or do I stand out here and yell at you?"

"Of course you must come in," Loukas said, recovering his composure and motioning for his

unexpected visitor to enter his hotel room. "This is a surprise—"

"When you didn't show up for opening night I thought I should call on you," the dark-haired woman said as she breezed into the hotel suite. "We *did* have a date, darling."

"Opening night," Loukas said, wincing. "Maggie, I am sorry—"

"I got the roses," she went on, ignoring his attempted apology. "Four dozen yellow roses, as usual, along with your card which means you'll be waiting for me at the stage door. I hope it was an emergency." She sank gracefully onto the sofa and looked expectantly at him, her brilliant dark eyes shooting sparks.

"Maggie love, you have every right to be angry," Loukas said, sitting next to her. "I should not have mixed business with pleasure."

"And which am I?"

"Pleasure — always pleasure," he said, kissing her hand.

"So, what was the business that caused you to stand me up?" she asked, sultry gaze watching his lips.

He rubbed his forehead and gave her a wry smile. "I'm afraid it's a rather long story."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He sighed. "You remember my mentioning Varina Tannek?"

"Often," she said dryly.

He quirked an eyebrow, but went on, "Well, she sent me a message that a mutual acquaintance of ours was living in this city now and that he might need my help." He shrugged. "I decided to contact him."

"And did he need help?" Maggie inquired.

Loukas looked away. "Nick needed my help seven hundred and forty years ago. I failed him then, and I fear I've failed him again."

Maggie accepted his words with equanimity. She knew Loukas' nature, and wasn't very surprised by anything he let drop. "Why don't you tell me more about this Nick, Loukas?"

\*

"...As you can see," Natalie said in her most professional manner, struggling to ignore Nick's knowing stare. She tugged self-consciously at the scarf around her neck, knowing it was incongruous with the lab coat.

"As I can see," Nick echoed, his attention on Nat and not on the corpse between them.

"It's definitely the same perp," Schanke observed, reading his cryptic notes. "This guy is nuts, Knight."

Nick blinked and looked at his partner, then down at the female corpse. "She makes four so far. We'd better find whoever did this before he kills another one."

"And before Stonetree hands us our heads on a platter," Schanke remarked, flipping his notebook shut. "But there's nothing to tie the victims together, except the ways they were murdered, right? Different jobs, different races, lived in different parts of the city.... So how do we stop this guy's hobby? We don't know who's going to be next."

"At least you know it'll be a woman, if he remains true to that pattern," Nat said, snapping off a glove.

"Different jobs," Schanke said, frowning at Nick. "But not that different. He got a stripper, a singer, a porn queen and some gal who does commercials. They're all entertainers."

"Entertainers?" Nick asked, a glint in his eyes.

"Sure. So it stands to reason his next victim will be in the same field."

"That narrows it down," Nick said, rolling his eyes.

"Now wait," Natalie said, holding up her hand. "They really *do* have something in common — a stripper, singer, porn queen — like in burlesque. There's a revival of *Gypsy* that just opened. It's been advertised for weeks," she continued, sitting at her computer.

"Where does the commercial actress come into it?" Nick asked, leaning over her shoulder.

"Here it is; she's the understudy for Maggie Jordan," Nat said, scrolling through the report.

"Maggie is the star of *Gypsy*."

"It's pretty weak," Schanke said after a moment. "As leads go."

"But it's all we've got," Nick said, straightening up. "Let's go, Schanke."

"Go? Where are we going, Knight?"

"The theater, of course."

"Right," said Schanke, "I knew that." He trailed after his partner, muttering to himself.

Natalie watched them leave, then sighed and tapped the escape key on her computer. At least Nick's mind was on his case, and not on her anymore. They'd both been pretending their quarrel in Loukas' room had never happened, but she knew Nick was still upset about it. He sure as hell was upset about *something*.

Their badges cut through the arguments, finally gaining admittance to Maggie Jordan's dressing room.

"Would you look at this stuff?" Schanke said, picking up a pair of tassels.

Nick gave a passing glance, smiling at his partner's enthusiasm as Schanke inspected the various props and costumes lying about the dressing room. "You reckon she wears this on stage?"

Nick eyed the filthy robe Schanke held aloft.

"No, she wears that in the privacy of her dressing room."

They turned at the entrance of a dark-haired woman who stood in the doorway watching them.

"Ms. Jordan? I'm Detective Nick Knight and this is my partner—"

"Nick Knight," she repeated, her narrow-eyed gaze looking him over. "What can I do for you?" Her sultry voice clearly spoke of a double-entendre and Schanke swallowed at the sudden flare of passion in the room.

"Excuse me, but we have some questions," he said, trying to remind the pair of his presence.

"Questions? Oh, about poor Kelly," she said, going behind a screen. "I'm afraid I don't know much about her personal life—"

"She was your understudy, right?" Schanke interrupted, trying to be all business but the silhouette of her figure while she changed was most distracting.

"That doesn't mean we were buddies, detective."

"Schanke. You trying to tell me it was strictly business, never any mention of boy friend trouble?"

"Or girl friend trouble." Maggie came around the screen, now dressed in jeans and a sweater.

"You mean she was—?"

"I don't know, detective, but it *is* always a possibility," she said, sitting at the dressing table. "You should keep an open mind."

Nick took one look at Schanke's expression, then glanced down to hide a grin. "A good point, Ms. Jordan, but Kelly O'Neill's personal life is only part of the reason we're here." He met her eyes in the mirror, noting he had her attention. "Have you been receiving any threatening phone calls, crank letters — anything of that sort?"

One dark eyebrow arched in evident surprise. "Should I have been, Detective Knight?"

"Maybe," he answered. "Ms. O'Neill was the fourth woman to be murdered in as many weeks, by what we have reason to believe is the same man. We also have reason to believe that you may be next, Ms. Jordan."

She turned on the bench and stared at him, her dark eyes widening.

"Aw, c'mon, Nick," began Schanke, "that's kinda overstating things, isn't it?"

"You made the same observation yourself," Nick told his partner, though he continued to hold Maggie Jordan's gaze with his own. "Four women, all performers, all entertainers: a nightclub singer, a strip-show dancer, an actress who specialized in pornographic films, and Ms. O'Neill, who appeared in the local television advertisements for this play — and who was also your understudy, Ms. Jordan, for the title role of *Gypsy Rose Lee*."

She rose, a trifle shakily, and managed a wry smile. "Well, I must admit that your logic is quite

convincing — and more than a little unsettling.” She took a deep breath and went on, “But not completely unexpected — I *have* received some crank mail.”

Schanke exchanged glances with Nick. “Could we see some of the letters, ma’am?”

“I’m afraid not,” she said, picking up her jacket. “I threw them away.”

“You didn’t report it?”

“No, Detective Schanke. If I reported every strange or threatening letter, I’d need my own policeman to handle them. Those of us in the public eye are perfect targets for weirdos.”

“So much for getting a lead on this guy,” Schanke said under his breath, obviously disgusted.

Nick ignored him. “You *are* a target, Ms. Jordan, and I think you should have police protection.”

She tilted her head and looked at him. “I will accept it on one condition, Detective Knight.”

“What’s that?”

“That *you* provide it — personally.”

He blinked, then smiled. “I’ll see what we can arrange — at least for the evenings.”

“My partner needs his beauty rest during the days,” Schanke said sarcastically.

Maggie Jordan laughed. “Then that’s all I can ask. Thank you for the offer, Detective Knight.” She smiled brilliantly and swept out the door, leaving the two men looking after her in bemusement.

“How do you *do* that, Knight?”

“Do what, Schanke?”

“Get the babes to fall all over you.”

The blonde detective gave him a hard look, then said, “I’m going to see Ms. Jordan home. See you later, Schanke.” He left without waiting for an answer.

Schanke gaped after him, trying to find a suitable retort and failing miserably. He settled for grumbling under his breath as he followed them out to the parking lot.

Nick was opening the passenger side door to the dark green Caddy for Ms. Jordan when Schanke emerged from the theater.

“Oh, great, Knight — now how am I supposed to get home?”

“Ever hear of taxis, Schanke?” Nick said cheerfully as he closed the car door after Maggie had settled herself inside. “Wonderful inventions.” He grinned.

“I don’t suppose *you’d* consider calling a cab and letting me—”

“Not a chance,” Nick cut in, crossing in front of the car and opening the driver’s door. “Go home, Schanke.”

“Sure,” the other man said after a moment. “Why don’t I just go home?”

“I hope I haven’t inconvenienced you, Detective Knight,” Maggie said as he started the car’s engine.

“Nah. I prefer your company to Schanke’s,” Nick said with a wicked grin.

“But shouldn’t you at least give him a ride back to the station, or something? There *is* plenty of room,” Maggie said, scooting close to his side.

He considered the idea, then leaned forward and called, “All right, Schanke, I changed my mind. Get in and I’ll drop you at the station so you can pick up your car.”

“Oh, well that’s very *chivalrous* of you, Knight,” his partner said. “What’s the matter — forget to do your good deed for the day?”

“I’m sorry I gave you a hard time,” Nick said. “Now get in before I change my mind again.”

Schanke already had the car door open before Nick finished. He slid in, pretending not to notice Maggie’s proximity to his partner. He also ignored the hand she placed on Nick’s thigh and the way she snuggled against his partner.

“Perhaps I should let Schanke take this job,” Nick said softly, placing his hand over hers and squeezing. “I am on duty, Ms. Jordan, and my job is to provide protection, not entertainment.”

Maggie drew her hand back. “As you say, Detective, you are on duty. I’ll try to be a good girl... until you’re *off* duty.”

Schanke exhaled a long breath at the heat in her promise. “How do you do it, buddy?” he said softly.

"Quite well, I'm sure," Maggie answered him, patting his knee. "But I don't kiss and tell, Detective Schanke, so you'll just have to keep on wondering."

And Schanke did.

\*

"Nice place," Nick said, looking around Maggie's living room.

"Yeah, well, I've been in better and I've been in worse," she said from the kitchenette. "You should see my place in New York — a real rat's hole. But a starving actress takes what she can get."

"Not so starving now," Nick observed, sitting on the plush sofa that faced an enormous fireplace.

"Until my star falls," she said with a shrug, joining him and kicking off her shoes.

"The prospect doesn't seem to bother you," he said, laying his arm along the back of the sofa.

"Comes with the territory," she said, her tone philosophical. "Just like traveling and never having a real home. But I'll have it someday."

"No family?"

Maggie leaned her head back and her dark hair fell across his arm. "Not even a pet. I have friends, of course, but no one to call my own."

"I know that feeling," Nick muttered, staring at the crackling fire.

*"You are my brother, my child, Nicolas," LaCroix crooned, stroking Nick's face. "We are bound for eternity, brother."*

Nick shook himself as LaCroix's sibilant voice echoed in his mind.

"Detective, are you all right?"

He turned his head to find her face only inches away from his own. "I... I'm fine," he said, his gaze capturing hers. Something deep in her eyes called to him, and he became aware of the pulse beating rapidly in her throat.

"Can we forget your noble sense of duty?" she whispered, her hand caressing his cheek. "I won't tell if you won't."

He reached up and caught her hand, never taking his eyes from hers. "It isn't a good idea, Ms. Jordan, believe me."

"Tell me why not," she said against his lips as she leaned forward and kissed him.

He responded with unexpected passion, kissing her long and hard, his left hand cradling the back of her head. When they broke apart, he nuzzled her throat, kissing it as she tilted it up towards him. Abruptly he pulled away from Maggie, averting his eyes. "You must not tempt me — you don't know what I am...."

"Yes, I do," she told him firmly. She smiled as he looked at her in utter astonishment. "And I'm not afraid of you, Nick Knight."

"You should be," he said sadly, echoing the words he had once spoken to Jeanne d'Arc.

"Why — because you think you're some kind of monster? It doesn't have to be that way, Nick. I believe it's the fear that brings on the overwhelming need to kill. I don't fear you, and if there is no fear, then there is no killing."

Nick grabbed her wrists and held her away from him. "Where did you get that idea?!"

"It's my theory," she said, unflinching under his compelling gaze. "Are you feeling the urge to kill?"

Nick couldn't deny he was feeling lust for the woman, but the usual underlying edge of unbridled terror was absent. "How can you know?"

"Don't question it, Nick, just accept it. If I'm not afraid and are willing, why can't you be?"

"Willing," he whispered, hearing Loukas' words to him as they stood before his château's fireplace, long centuries ago. He let go of her wrists and raised a trembling hand to cup her cheek. "Maggie — I haven't the experience — I could kill you yet!"

She leaned towards him, winding her arms around his neck. "I'll chance it!" She kissed him then, with gentle insistence, her hands working at the buttons of his shirt. She drew away from his lips, smiled

and dropped kisses along his throat and down his bare chest.

Nick swallowed and glanced aside, catching a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. His dark blue eyes had retained their normal coloring, despite the growing desire he felt for Maggie. With a faint flicker of hope, aware of the rhythm of her heartbeat, Nick embraced the woman, caressing and nuzzling her while he loosened the buttons of her blouse.

Maggie uttered a soft groan of pleasure as he cupped her breasts, and eagerly allowed him to urge her back onto the sofa, his body half-covering hers. "It will be all right," she promised, when he hesitated. "Trust me, Nick." She smiled and touched his face. "Trust yourself."

He leaned into her caress, then bent his head and touched his lips to her throat.

She threw her head back, allowing him free access to the delicate skin that throbbed beneath his lips. Her hands cupped the back of his head, pressing him to her.

He felt his fangs lengthen and he tried to draw back, suddenly afraid he would lose control, but Maggie was determined, and she brought his mouth around to hers. "I'm not afraid," she whispered against his lips, her tongue gently caressing his fangs. "Give in to your desire, Nick... give into mine."

"Take me, Nick," he heard Alyce's voice murmuring.

"Yes," hissed LaCroix, "Take her, Nicholas!"

Nick drew away from Maggie, staring at her with bewilderment. He blinked, and Erica's smiling face replaced Maggie's. "I'm not afraid of you, Nicholas," Erica told him. "Please?"

"Nick?"

He shook his head and met Maggie's concerned gaze. "It's nothing," he told her. "You reminded me of someone for a moment." He turned his cheek into the hand she extended towards him, kissed the palm. With a sad smile, he said, "She was an actress, too."

"Did you — change her?" she asked gently.

"She asked me to," he said. He swallowed and looked away. "I should never have done it." He met her eyes. "Maggie, if that's what you want of me, I can't—"

"No," Maggie interrupted, placing her fingers against his mouth. "I only want to give what you need. No strings, I promise."

"How badly do you want me, Nicholas?"

Janette's voice echoed in Nick's head. The strings that had accompanied her seduction still bound him to her, even after nearly eight hundred years.

"Let me do this for you, Nick —and do it for me," Maggie said softly, her hands stroking his face and chest. "You won't owe me, and I won't owe you. Just the two of us together now. You won't have to ever see me again, if you don't want to and I will never try to contact you if that's your wish. Just us, now."

In her own way, Maggie was more seductive than Janette had been. Nick was losing control, his desire for Maggie overwhelming his chivalrous sense of doing the right thing. With a snarl of passion he silenced her with a kiss, pinning her beneath him.

\*

"Okay, okay," Nat grumbled as she stumbled to her front door. "Loukas!" she exclaimed, tugging at the hem of her oversized tee-shirt when she saw her unexpected visitor.

"May I come in, Natalie? I believe we need to talk," he said, handing her a huge bouquet of roses.

"Uh, yeah, sure," she stammered, hugging the roses and trying to hide her face behind their fragrant petals. She put one hand to her wild mass of curls, making a futile stab at trying to bring them under control. "Have a seat while I go get dressed."

"Perhaps I should have called," Loukas said belatedly, apparently noticing her attire for the first time. "If this is inconvenient, I can—"

"No, no, it's fine," she called over her shoulder, on her way down the hallway, still carrying the roses.

Loukas sighed and sat on her sofa. He seemed to be making an inordinate amount of stupid

decisions lately. What had happened to his usual fine sense of judgement?

"I guess I'm glad you came by," Natalie said, returning and still carrying the roses. "I have some questions—"

"I thought you might," Loukas said, standing and following her to the kitchen where she searched the cupboards for a vase. "I wanted to apologize for overstepping the boundaries.... I didn't realize how things are with you and Nick. I misunderstood and I should have known, even if Nick didn't."

"Now *I'm* the one who doesn't understand," Natalie said, frowning at him as she hauled a vase out from under the sink and proceeded to fill it with water.

Loukas folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the kitchen door. "I'm sure you don't," he agreed. "Nick has ordered me to cease my attentions to you, threatened me, in fact."

"Nick did that?" Natalie paused in her unwrapping of the roses. "Then why are you here?"

"Because I wanted to explain," Loukas said, lowering his arms and coming to stand beside her. "I didn't want you to think that last night meant nothing to me. After what we shared, to just disappear seems wrong. It would demean and uglify it in your memory."

She gave him a startled glance, then turned and busied herself with freeing the roses from their paper and putting them in the vase. Finding that they were too tall, she opened a drawer and got out a pair of scissors to trim the stems. "I'm sorry, too," she said at last. "I don't know what got into me. I usually don't..." She shrugged, then continued wryly, "...Make love with men I've just met. Even if they *are* vampires."

"Do you think that was the attraction? To see what it could be like with Nick, if he would only allow it?"

"What?!" Natalie whirled around, scissors in her hand.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what made me say that," he said, holding up his hands in surrender.

Natalie followed his gaze, then started laughing. "Sorry," she said, laying the scissors down. "You're not the only one not thinking straight."

Loukas held out a hand, offering a charming smile. "Then we can be friends?"

"At least not enemies," Natalie agreed, giving him her hand.

"Then here's to 'not enemies,'" Loukas said, kissing the back of her hand, then the palm. "And if you ever need a friend, call me."

"One can never have too many friends," Natalie said, giving herself a mental shake when she realized she was becoming mesmerized by his dark eyes and overwhelming charm. "Friends," she repeated firmly.

Loukas lowered her hand, a sudden sadness filling those dark eyes. "I will do my best to protect you from what may come," he said cryptically, kissing her hand one more time and then disappearing through the door.

"What the hell was that supposed to mean?" Natalie muttered, shaking her head, turning back and gathering up the roses and shoving them into the vase.

\*

Maggie stretched luxuriously, reveling in the sensation of warmth on her skin. She opened her eyes and watched Nick as he knelt before the fireplace, coaxing the embers back into flames. "What time is it?"

"About midnight," he answered, replacing the poker and turning toward her. A blanket was draped across his shoulders and around his waist. "I didn't mean to wake you, Maggie."

"You didn't," she assured him, stretching out an arm towards him and urging him to return to their nest of blankets on the floor.

He smiled as he sat beside her. "You're warm enough, I hope."

"Yes, and getting warmer all the time," she said, arching an eyebrow suggestively.

Nick cocked his head. "You need your rest, Ms. Jordan."

"I'm fine," she said, kissing the hand he extended to her. "So are you, Nick Knight. I thought

vampires couldn't—" She broke off, slanted a glance up at him as his hand tightened on hers.

"I think it's time you told me how you know so much about vampires," Nick said evenly, holding her gaze with his. "Don't you?"

"I read a lot?"

"Try again."

"Well, you're not really my first," Maggie said with a nonchalant shrug. "That's why I wasn't afraid of you, because I have personal knowledge of... vampires."

"Any particular vampire?"

"Nick, I don't think it really matters—"

"Vampire named...Loukas, maybe?"

The coldness in his voice did frighten her. "What's in a name? It probably isn't even his real name. I mean, you do have to change it as the years go by, don't you? So you can remain anonymous, safe?"

"He sent you after me. I can't believe he had the nerve—!" He got up from the sofa and began pulling on his clothes, angrily stuffing his shirttail into his waistband.

"No one sent me, Nick. Loukas has no idea I've even met you," she cut in. "I've known him several years; we've been lovers. In fact, I anticipate changing someday and so I am not afraid of dying. If you had gotten carried away, I simply would have changed sooner than expected. I was never in danger from you, and I knew it. I wanted to help."

"Help? Like Loukas helps? Who asked you to interfere in my life?!"

"I'm sorry if your story touched me," Maggie said, putting her hands over his as they encircled her throat. "I'm sorry if I thought you deserved a chance and I wanted to help."

"You thought I deserved a chance," Nick said, disgust in his eyes and voice. Suddenly aware of where his hands were, he released her and got up. "Go back to Loukas and tell him, 'No, thanks!'"

"Nick."

Her voice stopped him at the door.

"Just remember — it *did* work."

Nick refused to turn around, but the set of his shoulders told her he'd heard her.

The door slammed behind him, and Maggie sat up, rubbing her throat. She should have listened to Loukas when she'd expounded her theory and offered to help him with his "little" problem.

\*

Nick walked furiously to his car, parked on the street before Maggie's apartment building. His rage at the manipulative tricks of Loukas Alexandre kept him from remembering why had he gone there in the first place, to protect the actress.

He got into the Caddy and drove away, never noticing the dark-colored sedan parked on the opposite curb, its shadowy driver waiting inside.

\*

Nick stood outside the door to Loukas' hotel room, regarding the sliver of light from underneath the door with satisfaction. He knocked, knowing that Loukas wouldn't be asleep at this hour.

After a few minutes, the door was opened and Loukas eyed him questioningly. "Yes, Nick?"

"I want to talk to you."

Loukas raised a dark eyebrow, but stepped silently aside and admitted Nick to the suite. "What is it now?" he asked wearily. "Did you forget to add something the last time we spoke?"

Nick's eyes were lambent with controlled anger. "I cannot believe you would *dare* send that woman to seduce me just to prove your point, Loukas!"

"I did what?! *What* woman?"

"Maggie Jordan."

"Oh, gods," sighed Loukas, passing a hand over his eyes. "She went ahead with it, didn't she? I told her it was a bad idea, the worst possible course of action... Damn it, I forbade her outright to—" He stopped himself, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Nick. Maggie never did listen to me very well. She's rather headstrong and independent."

There was no doubting Loukas' sincerity and it knocked off the edge of Nick's anger. "What gave you the right to tell her about me?" he demanded, fighting to regain that edge.

"Maggie knows about our kind," Loukas said, sitting on the sofa and leaving Nick to his own choice. "I was trying to explain why I forgot our appointment—"

"You stood her up and used me as an out?"

"Explanation, Nick," Loukas corrected mildly. "She knew it had to be serious for me to forget her."

Nick folded his arms. "Seems to me that neither Natalie nor I had any problems until *you* showed up."

"Point taken," the other vampire admitted. "Do you want me to leave Toronto?"

Nick considered, then shrugged. "It's a free country. I won't ask that of you."

"Thank you," Loukas said, inclining his head.

They were silent, each thinking of the numerous times he had been forced to leave a settled life in one place and move on to another.

"I'm sorry," Nick added at last. "I thought Maggie was offering herself to me because *you* had ordered her to, and the thought that you'd use her as a pawn infuriated me."

Loukas accepted the apology. "You turned her down, I assume."

"No."

Loukas stared at him. "What?!"

Nick lowered his gaze. "As you say, Loukas, a willing donor is...different."

"Different. As I said," he repeated slowly, deciphering his meaning. "Then I can assume Maggie is...well. I am curious about one thing — how did she find you?"

Nick looked at him, a little nonplused. "We met at the theater. I was investigating a lead on the case—" He broke off, eyes widening in sudden alarm. "My god, Loukas, I've left her alone!"

"And this is something you should not have done? How is Maggie concerned with your case?"

"It was weak as leads go, but I thought she might be the next target — but even Schanke thought I was reaching—"

"Target for what?"

"Murder." Nick brushed his fingers across his upper lip, his nervousness evident. "I'd better go back—"

"Wait," interrupted Loukas, raising one hand. His eyes unfocused for a moment, as if he was opening himself up to an unheard link. Then he was on his feet, snagging his coat from the back of a chair. "I'm coming with you."

"My car's downstairs," Nick said, turning for the door apprehensively.

"It had best be a fast one," Loukas said tersely. "Maggie is dying."

Nick stared at Loukas' departing back, then hurried after him as the elder vampire stalked from the room.

\*

Maggie lay on the damp grass, wondering if she was losing her mind. Nick had warned her, but she had dismissed his concern and now she was paying the price.

She'd hurriedly dressed after his departure, intending to go to Loukas and confess. Who would have suspected the convenient cab driver who was waiting for her?

It was odd, feeling life seep out as she slowly bled to death in the late night quiet of the park. It was said a drowning man's life passed before his eyes, and Maggie thought insanely that the saying should include dying of a knife wound.

She shifted slightly, coughing at the pain. She'd told Nick she had no fear of death since it merely

meant Changing. Would she Change? And where was Loukas? He should have been with her, she thought irrationally.

The light from the full moon began to dim and Maggie closed her eyes. It didn't matter now.

\*

"Here," Loukas said as Nick slowed the car by the east side of the park. "Stop here." He had the passenger door open and was out of the Caddy before Nick had shut off the car's engine.

Nick got out and followed Loukas as he ran down the path nearest them, then left it to sprint down an embankment, heedless of the manicured grass, tearing for a bundle lying at the edge of the trees.

Nick stopped, one hand on the trunk of a maple tree, watching as the dark-haired vampire flung back his head and howled with grief as he knelt beside Maggie's body.

Nick pressed his cheek against the bark of the tree, his eyes stark with horror and guilt.

"No," murmured Loukas, touching the woman's cold cheek. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way, Maggie — not like this."

Nick forced his feet to carry him closer to them. "She said...she would Change. Is it true, Loukas? Will she come back to us?"

The other vampire touched Maggie's brow and throat, then glanced up at his companion. "I don't know. Perhaps... Her neck is unbroken; he used a knife — there." He gestured at the dark stain on Maggie's ribs. "She may Change."

Nick dropped to one knee, his hand gripping Loukas' right shoulder. "Then we must take her someplace where she can do it in peace. Not your hotel; there will be too many questions. And not her own home, not if she's going to return to it." He looked down at the still form, then said decisively, "My place. Help me with her, Loukas."

Loukas caressed Maggie's cheek, then looked up at Nick. "Where she will be safe." But his tone was flat and he made no move to get up. Instead he gathered her limp body to his heart and rested his cheek against her hair.

"Loukas, we've got to hurry if we're to keep this a secret," Nick urged, kneeling on the other side of the lifeless actress. "There's no time."

"No more time for Maggie," Loukas said sadly. "I wanted her to have a long, full life, Nick. I wanted so much for her..."

"If you don't snap out of it, she won't have *any* life," Nick hissed. "If the police find her, there'll be an autopsy and embalming. There will be no Change."

"Yes, of course. I must close myself off," Loukas said, getting to his feet and carefully cradling Maggie in his arms.

"This way," Nick said as he stood up.

The moon had veiled itself with clouds, leaving them to their necessary task in darkness.

\*

Later, in Nick's apartment, Maggie lay on the sofa, covered to the neck with a clean sheet. Loukas sat beside her, holding one limp hand in both of his.

Nick moved restlessly around the room, unable to settle in one place for more than a few minutes.

"Sit down, Nick," Loukas said, without looking at him.

Nick paused by the window, staring out at the graying sky. "It's been hours — dawn'll be here soon."

"It takes time, Nick, you know that."

"Yeah." He placed his fingers against the cold glass, curled them into a helpless fist. "I killed her, Loukas."

"Nick—"

"I was supposed to protect her, and I ended up leaving her to be slaughtered. I swear, when I find

the man who did this—”

“All right, Nick,” Loukas cut in. “I know.”

The blonde vampire pushed away from the window, advancing on his mentor, his features twisted with grief and rage. “I know, Nick. ‘Sit down, Nick’ — damn it, Loukas, why don’t you *hate* me?!”

Loukas looked up at him wearily. “It wasn’t your fault, Nick....”

“Stop being such a saint!”

Loukas uttered a single bark of laughter. “I’m no saint, Nicholas. I never was. You’re wrong if you think I’m not angry... I’m furious at you, at Maggie — at myself.” He gently folded Maggie’s hand across her breast, touched her cheek, then turned stark eyes toward Nick. “I should have paid more attention to our link, once I knew what she was planning. Maybe I could have—” He stopped, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter. She chose our Life. I warned her, after we had been together three times, what she was risking if we continued. She said she didn’t care, because she loved me and wouldn’t give me up.” He shrugged with embarrassment. “Maggie always *was* very persuasive — and one of the most stubborn women I’ve ever known.”

“Yeah,” Nick sighed. “I’ve noticed.” He met Loukas’ raised eyebrow with a rueful smile.

The two men exchanged understanding glances, and Loukas gestured to an empty armchair. This time Nick sat, some of the tension leaving his body.

After several minutes of silence, Nick said hesitantly, “Loukas, you mentioned a psychic link between you and Maggie. Will... Is there a link like that with Natalie?”

Loukas considered the question, his expression grave. “A very mild one, perhaps, but it will fade with time unless reinforced by continual sharing. I cannot sense her unless I open myself up to her mind, and I never do that — with anyone. The temptation to misuse the bond for one’s own ends is too great.”

Nick nodded, remembering how LaCroix had never had any such compunctions. “Were you linked with Solange, too?”

“Solange,” repeated Loukas softly, remembering the serving girl. “Yes, of course. Why do you ask?”

Nick stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace, long ago memories taking substance within them. “There’s something you should know....”

*Nick had been the guest of Loukas Alexandre for less than a fortnight when he became aware that LaCroix had found him. Day after day he awoke from chilling dreams of the master vampire’s face, still hearing LaCroix’s threats echoing in his mind.*

*He won’t save you, Nicholas came the sibilant warning one evening. I will destroy him and punish you for deserting me! Your soul belongs to me.*

“Don’t wager on it,” muttered Nick, casting about for his sword belt and buckling it on over his tunic. He never slept now but fully clothed, save for cloak and boots, weapons close to hand.

Nick stood up, fastening the woolen cloak at his throat with the silver brooch. He pulled on his soft deerskin boots, then glanced around the chamber Loukas had given him. Certain he had left nothing behind, he went to the door and walked down the winding staircase.

“M’sieur Chevalier?” questioned the brunette maid, encountering him in the great hall. “Do you require anything?”

“No, Solange,” Nick answered, smiling at her. This exchange had become an evening ritual between them, and he half-suspected she wished his answer would change one day. “Tell your master I must leave tonight, on business. If all goes well, I will see him tomorrow.”

She curtsied, her brown eyes curious, but without comment.

Nick left the château, walking down the pathway into the wildwood surrounding it. The rising moon cast long shadows across the ground and silvered the leaves of the trees.

“There you are, Nicholas,” whispered LaCroix, stepping from the shadows to bar his way. “We’ve missed you, Janette and I. Have you missed us?!”

Nick’s hand went to his sword hilt. “Not particularly, LaCroix.” He drew the weapon and the blade flashed in the moonbeams.

*Pale eyes glittered in the moonlight. "You've betrayed me, Nicholas. You must pay for that!" Nick swung his sword as LaCroix sprang at him, but the master vampire was swifter and closed with Nick, deflecting the swordstroke with a sweep of his arm.*

*The sword grated on bone, then went spinning away as LaCroix screamed in rage and grappled with the younger vampire, bearing him to the turf.*

*"Your new master doesn't look after you very well, does he?"*

*"He's not my master," Nick managed.*

*"Then why do you fight for him?" taunted the white-haired vampire.*

*Nick kneed LaCroix and rolled aside, coming up with his dagger in his left hand. He slashed at his opponent, grinning as he felt the wetness soaking LaCroix's sleeve from his first blow.*

*LaCroix grasped Nick's wrist in a crushing grip, forcing him to drop the knife. "Cocky, Nicholas! Always was your problem. I'll take it out of you." His eyes glittered green in the moonlight as he bared his teeth.*

*Nick screamed as LaCroix's fangs sank deep into his throat. Weakened, he ceased struggling. He was aware of being lifted, of the rush of air on his face, then nothing.*

*He returned to consciousness in the tower room of LaCroix's castle. He blinked as Janette swam into focus, her hands filled with white cloths.*

*"Oh, Nicolas," she murmured, wrapping the bandage around his throat. "Why?"*

*He stared at her, then tried to struggle upright, only to find himself manacled hand and foot to the bed upon which he lay. "Janette," he said.*

*She finished bandaging his neck and briefly touched his forehead before rising from the chair next to him. "He's furious," she said flatly. "You should never have tried to leave us."*

*As she turned away from him, Nick saw red welts on her bared shoulders. He lifted a chained hand beseechingly, stopping as the chamber door opened.*

*LaCroix stood there, arms folded across his chest. "Leave us."*

*Janette glanced at him, her expression unreadable, then went out, not looking at Nick.*

*"What are you going to do?"*

*"Nothing," LaCroix said. "You think you can go without feeding, Nicholas? Then you shall!" His lips curled in an evil smile. "I wish you joy of it." He turned on his heel and went out, sliding the bolt shut on the door.*

*"No!" shouted Nick, struggling in his chains as the meaning of LaCroix's words sank in.*

*Days passed into weeks, and the Hunger gnawed at Nick. He lay helpless, too weakened by LaCroix's attack and the lack of nourishment to break free of his manacles. There was a sliver of sunlight which came through the high window each day, but it never reached Nick's bed, so he didn't even have the option of suicide.*

*On the thirtieth day, LaCroix unbarred the door and shoved a young woman into the room.*

*"It was Solange," Nick said, his head bent in shame. "I don't know how he found out about her — maybe he'd spied on your household and saw her, maybe he caught the image from my mind.... He unchained me and said, 'It's this or nothing, Nicholas!' And he stood there and watched while I—"*

*Nick squeezed his eyes shut against the tears. "She remembered me, came right to me, and I took her, like a beast! I couldn't control myself. And LaCroix laughed when it was over. He said he always knew I would come around sooner or later. Loukas, I'm sorry—!"*

*The dark man was at Nick's side, a hand on his shoulder. "Nick, Nick, I'm sorry! I never knew why you had disappeared that night. I was blind to all of it. Even when I sensed that Solange was gone, I didn't know why. Please forgive me."*

*Nick looked at him and nodded once.*

*Into the silence following Nick's confession came a plaintive voice from the figure on the sofa.*

*"That bastard tried to kill me!"*

*"Maggie!" exclaimed the two men in unison.*

*She blinked up at them as they hurried to her. "Where the hell were you, Loukas? I thought I was*

a goner for sure."

Loukas exchanged a quick glance with Nick, then dropped to his knees, clasping Maggie's hands in his. "Maggie, my love, the bastard *did* kill you." He squeezed reassuringly as her widening eyes indicated she understood.

Nick saw that the first sunbeams were filtering into the apartment, and he moved to get the remote control, shutting the blinds and discreetly turning his back on the lovers' reunion for a few moments.

He remembered Erica's joy upon her awakening, but her death had not been a violent one, and had, in fact, been planned.

When he turned back he found that Loukas was now on the sofa, Maggie in his lap with her face buried against his chest. He was stroking her hair and murmuring softly, and Nick felt like an outsider. He had no right to witness such a personal moment. Had he not been so wrapped up in his own selfish thoughts, she would have been spared this.

"Nick?"

Her soft voice startled him and he took a step toward her, then paused. "Yes, Maggie?"

"I want the bastard."

"You'll have to get in line, my sweet," Loukas said, kissing her temple. "And there won't be much left when Nick and I are through."

"You know I wasn't afraid to die," she said, her hand gripping one of Loukas'. "But not like that — no one should have to die like that. The terror...the pain...so alone."

"Ah Maggie," Nick moaned, guilt swamping him. "I should never have left you—"

"I didn't believe the danger was real, Nick. I was careless. He even said how easy I made it for him."

Nick's head came up, his eyes glittering. "He spoke to you? Do you remember his voice? Maggie, did you see him?"

"It was dark," she answered uncertainly. "When I got into the cab, I just saw a cabdriver. No one ever looks at a cabdriver, really." She frowned. "I think he had an accent."

"What kind of accent?"

"Later, Nick," Loukas told the detective. "Maggie, are you hungry?"

"Ravenous," she replied without thinking. "I could eat a—" she broke off. "Oh. I guess I couldn't — now."

Loukas looked meaningfully at Nick, who said, "I'll get something for us."

"It would help if you could warm it up a bit," Loukas said as Nick turned toward the kitchen.

"Right." Nick gave silent thanks for the microwave oven he had bought for appearance's sake, as he took a bottle from the refrigerator. He poured the contents into three ceramic cups, set the microwave for the minimum time needed to raise them to body temperature, then carefully set the cups on a tray.

He sensed that it would be easier for Maggie to take her first drink if they were also drinking, and Loukas seemed to approve, taking one of the cups without comment.

"It's cow blood," Nick said, before Maggie could ask. "Think of it as having a very rare steak." He smiled at the gratitude he saw in her eyes, and took a cup for himself, leaving her to pick up the last one whenever she chose.

Maggie stared at the lone cup on the tray, then finally mustered a brave smile and picked it up. "Better get it over with," she muttered, taking a tentative sip.

Her eyes widened, and she drained the cup's contents with a series of gulps. She leaned back, her eyes closed. "It's good," she said, sounding surprised.

"Would you like some more?" Nick ventured.

"Mmm... Yes, thanks." She held her cup out to him, then snuggled against Loukas while he idly played with a strand of her hair.

Maggie sipped more slowly at her second cupful, and the men did the same.

"What am I going to tell the theater?" she asked, stifling a yawn. "Sorry I can't go on tonight, but I'm dead right now!" She giggled drunkenly.

Loukas said, "You need to rest, Maggie. I'll call them and make your excuses. After you've slept,

we'll talk, hmm?"

"S'alright," she mumbled, already half-asleep. "Thanks — both of you."

"Hush now," Loukas whispered, enfolding her in his arms, obviously not about to leave her.

Nick gathered the empty mugs and said quietly, "I'll be upstairs if you need me. Ignore the telephone; it's on an answering machine."

Loukas inclined his head in acknowledgment, closing his own eyes.

Nick went up to his loft and lay down on his bed, drained by the emotions of the past few hours.

When Maggie's first scream came, Nick bolted upright in bed. He listened to Loukas' soft voice soothing her, and his guilt grew.

He covered his ears with his hands, burying his face in his pillow until all was silent again. Maggie had given him so much, and how had he repaid her? By forgetting his trust, neglecting his duty.... "I'll find him, Maggie," he whispered. "I swear it!"

The murmurs from downstairs subsided, and Nick drifted into a restless sleep of his own, waking at last to hear Loukas proclaiming,

"I forbid it, Maggie!"

Curious, Nick padded down the stairs, finding his guests squared off against each other, Loukas glowering at a stubborn-faced Maggie.

"And I tell you it's the best way," she was saying, ignoring Nick's presence. "He thinks he killed me and if he finds out I've 'survived', he'll come after me anyway. At least if we set the trap, he can't hurt me — or anyone else. I'll do it alone if I have to but I will get him."

"She's right," Nick said, coming the rest of the way down the stairs.

Loukas turned his frown on Nick, who ignored it and said, "We need a plan, Loukas. Maggie can't simply disappear; the killer will think he's gotten away with it and keep on murdering. If we tell them she was attacked but escaped, the murderer will want to find out why. He'll come for her — and we'll be waiting. And you don't really want Maggie to go off on this without us being there, do you?"

The look on Maggie's face clearly told him that was precisely what would happen, and Loukas' broad shoulders sagged in defeat. "We will set your trap, my love, but I think it would be best if no mention was made of the attack. That way he will not expect police involvement nor that you would have body guards. You will have bodyguards, Maggie, of that you may be certain."

"I'd have it no other way," she said, more than willing to accept his terms. "You do understand, don't you, Loukas? There's something deep inside of me that won't let this go."

"I'm afraid I understand all too well, my love," he said, taking her hands and pulling her to him. "You will not rest until you have your vengeance."

"Vengeance is such a harsh word, but I do want to put a stop to his activities. I want him to know I am the one bringing him down." Maggie rubbed her cheek against his shirt front. "Then we can get on with our lives."

"Lives," Nick said slowly, shaking his head. "Existence, you mean. We aren't really alive. We can't love like mortals, we can't be mortal. We merely... exist."

"I can't think of anyone I'd rather exist with," she said after a moment of strained silence. "Loukas, you know I've always looked forward to the Change and being with you. I just wasn't expecting it this soon — or in such a manner. I'm sorry if Nick has a different view of this life, but I don't see it as a punishment or something to fight."

"Nick has a different view because his — existence — is different," Loukas said gently. "Because he was brought over in evil, he has different limitations."

"Limitations?"

"Crosses, garlic, daylight — some of the more traditional vampiric allergies," Loukas explained.

"None of that's important," Nick cut in, not in the mood to discuss his "allergies". "We need to make our plans if Maggie intends to go on stage tonight."

Maggie glanced reflexively at her wristwatch, then said, "We're lucky — there wasn't any matinee this afternoon, and I can still make it to the theater in time for tonight's performance."

"I'll drive you," Nick said. "Do you need to get anything from your apartment?"

"No, everything I would need is already at my dressing room," Maggie said. "Loukas, I can get you a house ticket for one of the orchestra seats, and Nick can watch from the wings, if I arrange for a backstage pass."

"All right," Loukas agreed, exchanging glances with Nick. "Afterwards, I'll take you home to your place and stay with you. I do not intend to leave you alone until this matter is taken care of permanently."

"And then you'll leave me?"

"Maggie love, I didn't mean that," Loukas protested, his manner uneasy. "Of course, we won't be able to be together as we have been but I will always love you and be there for you."

Nick glanced sharply at Loukas, then looked at Maggie as she murmured, "Well, that is decent of you, Mr. Alexandre."

"Let's go, shall we?" Nick said hastily, anxious to forestall further argument.

"Certainly, why not?" Maggie snapped, turning her back on Loukas and going toward the door with what was very nearly a flounce.

"I always thought you were so smart, the ultimate master vampire," Nick said softly, looking at Loukas with disgust. "A beautiful woman, madly in love with you — who knows why — and you turn your back on her. I don't think you *can* help me, Loukas Alexandre. You can't even help yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to protect that woman from herself and keep her from doing something rash. I care about her, even if you don't." And with that, Nick followed Maggie, leaving Loukas to follow or not.

Loukas ran a hand across his face, feeling as if he'd lost total control, and it was an unfamiliar feeling. Maggie had no business being out so soon after Awakening. There was more to it than existing on blood; she would have unusual strength, superior hearing, even her eyes would be sensitive to light at first. But instead she was off on a blood trail of her own, seeking revenge in the name of justice.

With a sigh, he left Nick's apartment.

\*

Loukas refused the orchestra seat, insisting on a backstage pass for himself as well. Maggie had given no thought to how her vampiric eyes would react to the stage lights; how her vampiric ears would be assaulted by the sounds around her; how she would deal with no reflection in her makeup mirror. Loukas intended to be there for her, no matter how angry she was with him.

The stage crew recognized Loukas, and allowed him access to all areas, with barely a raised eyebrow. Nick was another matter initially, but the combination of his pass and police I.D., with a few glib words about 'security', cleared his way.

Loukas watched as Nick weaved through a knot of stage-hands and stopped beside him. "Five minutes until curtain, I'm told."

Nick nodded, glancing upwards, and then out at the audience. "I apologize for losing my temper, Loukas. I was worried about Maggie."

The taller vampire shrugged dismissively. "It's all right. How is she doing, by the way? She wouldn't let me in her dressing room."

Nick grinned wryly. "Me either."

Loukas glanced at him with surprise. He started to speak, but the first notes of the overture silenced him as the lights were brought down in the house, and then up on the stage.

At the brightness of the lights, Nick hastily pulled out his dark sunglasses and slid them over his nose. He paused, glanced at Loukas and said, "Will Maggie be able to handle the lights? I wasn't thinking—"

"Neither is she," Loukas cut in. "This scheme is madness. If she must see it through, why will she not let me help? Maggie needs time to adjust, to adapt, to learn how to shield herself. I can teach her, guide her."

"You said yourself she needs time," Nick pointed out. "She'll come around, Loukas."

"Excuse me," Loukas said after a moment. "I must try once more to speak with her."

"Loukas," said Nick, catching his sleeve, "it's probably none of my business — but that woman loves you. Don't throw that away just because of some crazy notion you've got about what is and isn't possible between you two."

Loukas met his friend's eyes. "One step at a time, Nick." He melted into the backstage darkness, leaving Nick frowning after him until the stage manager steered the detective to a more out-of-the-way spot from which to watch the musical.

When a grim-faced Loukas returned a few moments later, Nick knew he had been unsuccessful.

"Her dresser said Ms. Jordan cannot be disturbed as she is preparing for the performance," Loukas said curtly. "And she gave the chorus line my roses."

Nick winced at that. "Be patient," he advised.

"In my nearly two thousand five hundred years of existence I have cultivated a great deal of patience, but it seems Maggie is using it up quickly," Loukas said, dark eyes following Maggie's figure as she emerged from her dressing room and waited to take her place on stage. With her breasts strapped down and dressed as the adolescent Gypsy, she looked fragile and vulnerable, in need of protecting.

"Twenty-five hundred?" Nick repeated. "I had no idea it had been that long. LaCroix—"

"Yes, I knew him long before you came to my attention. We had crossed swords on more than one occasion," Loukas said absently, his gaze still on Maggie, as she moved on stage. Suddenly his attention shifted and he looked toward the audience. "He is out there."

Nick gave an involuntary start, and glanced around wildly for an instant before saying in a low voice, "The killer?"

"Yes," Loukas murmured. "Maggie's murderer is in that audience."

Nick scanned the darkened theater, listening for the softer, anonymous sounds of the crowd hidden under the music and singing. "He's come to gloat. He'll be disappointed, won't he?"

"Very, I should think," Loukas agreed. "And angry. And that anger may very well betray him."

"He'll come after her."

"As planned. But we shall be ready."

"But will Maggie?" Nick asked, nodding at the actress as she stumbled off stage, hands over her eyes.

"Ah, Magpie," Loukas murmured softly, moving towards her.

Quickly lowering her hands, Maggie took a steady breath and stiffened her spine.

"She has incredible inner strength," Nick noted, his tone admiring.

"Matched only by her stubbornness," Loukas agreed, studying the set of her determined jaw. "Fortunately, she will not be on stage again for a little while. She'll have a chance to recover."

Nick looked at the audience, sensing motion. "Someone's leaving... Intermission already?"

Loukas, knowing the play's structure better, shook his head. "It's too early. Nick, go to Maggie's dressing room and make her let you in. I don't want her left alone at any time."

The detective hurried away without further urging. A few minutes later, he knocked on her door. "Maggie? Maggie, it's Nick. May I come in?"

There was an uneasy silence and Nick focused his hearing on the soft sounds behind the locked door. "Please, Maggie, let me help."

After a moment, he heard the sound of a bolt sliding and the door was slowly opened. "Ms. Jordan says you can come in," her dresser whispered, motioning for Nick to enter. "She's feeling bad, but she won't let me call a doctor," the woman continued in a low voice.

"That's enough, Vickie," Maggie said sharply and the woman looked startled that Maggie had overheard. "Leave us."

"She's usually not so bossy," Vickie said with a shake of her head as she slipped past Nick. "I'll be right outside if she needs anything."

Nick waited until the dresser had closed the door behind her, then he stepped over to the chaise lounge where Maggie lay with a cloth over her eyes. "Maggie," he said gently, kneeling beside her and taking her hand. "I know it can be overwhelming...."

"The lights...."

"Your eyes are now highly sensitive to light, but you'll adapt in time. Even sunlight will be too much for you at first, although it won't be as damaging as it is to me," Nick told her, gently stroking the back of her hand.

"I could hear everyone! All those voices roaring in my head—"

"Again you'll adapt, learn to tune out and only hear what you want," Nick continued, the stroking now rhythmic and mesmerizing. "It would be easier if you'd allow Loukas—"

"No."

"Maggie, I don't know what's between the pair of you, but I do know he loves you and this is tearing him up. You need him to guide you through the Change. The rules are different for those of his Blood and I can't serve as mentor. If you could have seen him, *heard* him, when we found you... Maggie, if he could undo it all, he would. If he could have died in your place, he would not have hesitated."

"Then why is he going to leave me?"

"Is he?"

"Oh yes." The certainty in her voice told Nick she truly believed it, whether or not it was true.

"Then convince him not to," Nick said, his voice softly forceful.

Maggie slid the cloth from her eyes and stared at Nick. "What?"

"Fight for him... if you *really* do love him. Or just stand there and push him away, make it easy for him to say it wouldn't work. Play into his hands, Maggie, or make him play into yours."

"You think I could do that?"

"I think you can do anything you set your mind to," Nick said honestly. Smiling, he added, "You convinced me, remember. Why not Loukas Alexandre?"

She met his smile with one of her own. "I do love him, Nick."

"Good." Nick brushed his fingers against her temple, then lifted her hand to his lips briefly before releasing it. "He's lucky."

"Perhaps."

"No doubts about it," he reassured her, as he stood up. "Should I tell him that you'll see him now?"

"In a little while," Maggie said, lying back and closing her eyes again. "I just need a few minutes' rest...."

"All right." Nick looked around the dressing room, a vague uneasiness sharpening his instincts. Was Loukas closing in on the killer, or was the killer closing in on Maggie? Certainly he wouldn't be idiot enough to try anything in the theater where he could easily be caught.

The detective walked slowly around the room, ducking his head into the bathroom, then turning as Maggie said, "Nick, please ask Vickie to come in now. I must apologize for being so sharp with her."

Nick hesitated, then stepped to the door where he found Vickie hovering. "Stay with her," he instructed as she passed him. It was time to find Loukas.

"I've lost him," Loukas said when Nick touched his arm. "But he *is* here...."

"Maggie is weakened, Loukas," Nick interrupted. "She needs you, your guidance—"

"I can't help her," Loukas cut in angrily.

"She's asked for you," Nick said, stretching the truth a bit. "I'm the one who can't help her, not you. Would you turn your back on Maggie and let her go through this alone, just because she lashed out without thinking?"

Loukas' dark eyes flared with momentary anger, then he bent his head slowly. "No, of course not."

"She said she loves you, Loukas," Nick assured him, pressing his advantage. He smiled at the look of hope and gratitude on his friend's face. "Let's go!"

"You had better not be wrong about this, Nick," grumbled Loukas, even as he turned on his heel and strode toward the dressing room.

Nick fervently hoped he was right.

The dressing room was empty.

"Where's Maggie? Why did you leave her alone?" Loukas demanded, turning on Nick.

Nick drew back from the anger flashing in the dark eyes. "There was a maid...someone named

Vickie. She wasn't alone, Loukas!"

"Vickie? Vickie!" he bellowed, turning around. "Where's Ms. Jordan?" he demanded when the dresser hurried into the room.

"Mr. Alexandre? I left her right here," Vickie said, looking around. "She asked me to go tell the manager she couldn't continue the performance. She did look awful, Mr. Alexandre, so pale and her head hurt something fierce. I've been her dresser for five years and I've never known her to call for her understudy. Do you suppose she stepped out for some air? To clear her head?"

"Outside," Loukas repeated, brow furrowed as he looked at Nick. "I'm afraid she probably did, Vickie. She shouldn't be alone, feeling as she does. I'll go after her, see that she gets home safely."

He strode from the room and Nick started after him, leaving the dresser staring after the oddly-behaving pair. Shaking her head, she began picking up Maggie's scattered clothes.

In the alley outside the stage door, Loukas paused and looked skyward as if searching for the answers in the stars. "Maggie," he whispered.

"We'll find her, Loukas," Nick said, touching the other vampire's arm.

"Nicholas Tannek once accused me of wanting Varina and seeking her double. I will admit that I was envious of his good fortune... until I met Maggie. Her warm, loving heart didn't care that I was a monster, an unnatural creature who lives on the emotions and blood of others. And my selfish greed has now forced Maggie to share my fate. I had no right to love her, to impose this life on her."

Startled to hear words of despair from the older vampire, Nick tightened his grip on Loukas' arm convulsively. "She chose it, Loukas! And you've got to focus on her now! Where is she?!"

"Not far from here," Loukas said absently, his gaze fixed on a distant point. "Maggie, no!"

Even knowing how fast a vampire could move, Nick was taken by surprise when Loukas took off down the alley. "Where is she?" he demanded, catching up to the elder vampire and keeping pace.

"The park, where she — where he killed her," Loukas replied, not even sparing Nick a glance when the detective took to the air.

Nick listened for the sounds of Maggie's voice as he searched the ground below him. The snarl of an animal cornering its prey reached his ears and Nick followed the sound, touching down just as Loukas appeared.

The killer was sobbing hysterically, frantically pushing at Maggie as she held him pinned to the ground.

"Magpie, no."

Snarling, Maggie turned her head, eyes aglow with an unholy light.

"Maggie, come to me," Loukas coaxed, holding out his hands. "He isn't worth your soul, beloved. I'll lose you forever if you give yourself over to the hate. Please, my magpie, don't do this."

His own desire for revenge burned in his throat, and Nick swallowed hard in an attempt to gain control. How much harder it had to be for Maggie. Fists clenched, Nick balanced on the balls of his feet, ready for whatever happened.

Maggie wrenched her gaze from Loukas' face, staring down at the pathetic killer as he struggled in her grasp.

"Please, Maggie, come to me and leave justice in the hands of a higher power. Don't foul your hands with his blood." Loukas took a step toward her, his hands reaching pleadingly for her.

The light began to dim in her eyes and she slowly released her choke hold on the man's neck and rose to her feet.

"That's right, my Maggie, join me," Loukas said, his voice now low and seductive, warm with promises. "Just a few more steps, little love." Maggie hesitated, eyes held by his, and then falteringly she placed her fingers on his outstretched palms. Loukas wrapped his hands around her trembling fingers and pulled her to him.

"Maggie, Maggie," he whispered against her hair as he embraced her. "Forgive me for this, but it had to be your choice not to kill him."

"I wanted to," whispered Maggie, closing her eyes.

"I know," he soothed. "But you didn't, and that is what matters."

Forgotten by the couple, the man on the ground sat up, rubbing at his bruised throat. With a terrified glance at Nick, who had stepped toward him, the killer scrambled to his feet and bolted down the pathway.

"Stop!" Nick shouted in his best policeman's bellow, pursuing the fugitive as he pelted toward the street. With a snarl of triumph, he reached out and seized the fleeing man's collar.

"She tried to kill me, man," exclaimed the captive as Nick spun him about. "You saw what she—" He stopped at the sight of Nick's yellow eyes. "You're another one!"

Nick tilted his head and grinned, exposing his fangs. "Not exactly. I have less of a conscience about killing vermin like you."

"Nick," Loukas called warily.

The detective ignored him. "Does it give you pleasure, killing the women? Is that why you cut them and leave them to bleed to death?" He shook his captive. "*Is it?!*"

"They asked for it, all of them! Especially that one," he babbled, nodding at Maggie as she stood in the haven of Loukas' embrace. His breath was cut off in a choking gasp, and he clutched at the vise-like hands grasping his throat.

"What gives you the right to pass judgement, to condemn others to death?" Nick growled, shaking the man until his teeth rattled in his head.

"Nicholas!"

Startled by Loukas' command, Nick relaxed his hold on his captive, and the man took full advantage of the moment by slipping free and running across the park.

"He's seen and he knows too much," Nick said, half-apologetic as he took after him.

Loukas stood with his arms around Maggie, afraid to let her go and half-afraid that Nick would be unsuccessful. He tightened his hold on her, touched his lips to her temple and whispered calming reassurances.

Nick saw the speeding truck, realized the murderer's frantic flight would lead him directly into its path, and he hesitated a moment too long even for vampire reflexes. Nick closed his eyes and averted his head as the man's screams were abruptly cut off.

"We should go," he said, joining Loukas and Maggie. "There could be awkward questions if we remain on scene."

"Yes, of course," Loukas agreed, his arm around Maggie's shoulders.

"We can go back to my place—"

"No, I think Maggie and I shall go to my hotel. After she took ill at the theater, I took her home with me to look after her. We have been there all night."

"But the hotel clerk will know what time you came in. You took her to my place, for safety reasons, and spent the night there," Nick revised. "I don't think there will be any suspicions, but it would be best to have an alibi just in case. I was assigned to this case, and was guarding Maggie, so it would be reasonable."

"You know best in these matters," Loukas said, kissing Maggie's temple and hugging her to him. "Maggie must be protected at all costs."

"Look, I'll be along just as soon as I talk to the truck driver and take care of the details with the police," Nick said, glancing at the accident scene. "Maggie, everything's going to be all right. He won't hurt you or anyone else ever again."

"I should be sorry, but I'm not! I'm glad he's dead," she said fiercely, one hand clutching at Loukas' shirt front. "Glad!"

"It's all right, Magpie," Loukas soothed, stroking her hair. He looked at Nick over her head and Nick nodded in agreement. "We're going to Nick's place where you can rest and come to terms with what has happened."

"And you won't leave me, Loukas." It was a statement, not a question, and the command in her tone was unmistakable.

"I won't leave you, Maggie," he said softly, staring into her eyes as his thumb stroked her jaw. "I don't think I could, even if I wanted to, love. We will deal with the problems as they arise, and not worry

until then."

This seemed to satisfy Maggie and she snuggled against him as they walked away, leaving Nick to deal with the accident scene.

Nick managed to assemble a believable tale of how the man had attacked Maggie in the park, babbling about killing her as he had the others, and when Nick chased him the man had run into the path of the truck. He promised a full report to accompany the accident report, knowing that both Stonetree and Schanke would demand details.

He watched as the killer's body was placed in a body bag and loaded into the coroner's wagon. He would have to talk to Natalie, too.

Nick went back to the theater and got his car, then drove to the police station. He left a message on his apartment's answering machine, saying he had been tied up momentarily with paperwork, then headed for Natalie's office.

She looked up at his rap on the door. "Nick, where have you been?"

He offered an apologetic smile. "Busy. Look, Nat, I need a favor from you. They're bringing in an accident victim.... I think he's the serial killer we've been after. I need to find out if you can make sure you handle the autopsy yourself. And if there's anything a little...odd...about the body, could you just, overlook it?"

"Overlook it? Nick, what have you done? Are there holes in the neck?" Natalie demanded, looking up from the computer screen.

"Not so loud," he begged, glancing around. "I don't *think* there are holes, but I'm pretty sure his neck will have bruises. Maggie wasn't aware of her strength—"

"Maggie?"

"Maggie Jordan, the woman this guy was after," Nick said, motioning at the gurney being wheeled in. "He ran in front of a speeding truck."

"Then *why* would there be bruises on the neck?!"

Nick waited until the orderlies left, then perched on the edge of her desk. "Maggie was strangling him when Loukas and I caught up with them—"

"Loukas? Loukas is involved in this?"

"Maggie is a... friend of his," Nick said, giving her a sheepish grin. "A very good friend."

"Is she—?"

"Very recently, thanks to him." He nodded at the body. "He killed her, Nat."

"Before or after she did this?" she asked, pulling back the sheet and touching the bruises.

"Before," he admitted. "I'm asking you to protect her."

"By falsifying reports."

"By leaving out details," he corrected, leaning across the body so his face was inches from hers. "I may have made some of those bruises."

Natalie dragged her gaze from his, looked down at the body between them. "Well, they certainly wouldn't be the cause of death in this case," she said lamely. "I mean, it's pretty obvious the impact of the truck alone could have killed him, but the report says he was thrown about fifty feet into the air before slamming into the pavement. I probably won't have to do much of an autopsy to determine cause of death. The bruises are pretty insignificant, really."

"Thanks, Nat. I know it's a difficult thing I'm asking, but it's for the best. It would only lead to more questions that don't need to be answered."

"Okay, Nick, I said I'd do it," Natalie said with a frown. "Did you... I mean does Loukas... How did she change?"

"Loukas had taken from her enough times that when she died, she awoke to the vampire life," Nick said reluctantly. "It was...a slow, painful death, Nat. Both she and Loukas need some time to adjust to what has happened. They're at my place now. Maggie is pretty distraught."

"I suppose waking up dead could do that," Nat said flippantly. "Sorry," she added at the look he shot her.

Nick straightened up and turned for the door. "I've got to write up the reports. Thanks for your

help, Natalie, I appreciate it.

"You're welcome," she murmured, sighing as she looked down at the corpse again.

"Knight, what have you been doing?" Schanke demanded as he met Nick leaving the lab. "Besides the obvious, I mean."

"You have a dirty mind, Schanke," Nick retorted.

"Hey, it was pretty clear what she had in mind," his partner said, keeping pace with Nick as he strode back towards the squad room. "So did you protect her?"

"Not well enough," Nick said without looking at him. "The murderer kidnapped her when I left her alone for a while. He took her to the park and tried to kill her, but she got away from him. Tonight I trailed him back to the park. I almost had him, Schanke, and he'd admitted to killing the others... Then he took me by surprise and got loose. Ran right into the path of a truck. He's dead."

"Oh. Well, guess that saves the cost of a trial," Schanke said with a shrug. "So are you going to celebrate with little Miss-Hot-to-Trot?"

"Schanke, shut up."

"Touchy, are we?"

Nick just shook his head and walked away. Schanke would never change.

"Hey, Knight!"

Nick turned around, braced for another sleazy comment.

"Glad you saved her."

"Me too," Nick said with a little smile. "Thanks."

"Knight, Stonetree's looking for you."

Nick nodded in response to the passing detective, then turned towards Stonetree's office. "No time like the present," he muttered to Schanke.

"Good luck," Schanke said, giving Nick a look that said he was glad it wasn't him being called on the carpet.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" Nick asked, poking his head into Stonetree's office.

"Sit down, Knight," Stonetree ordered, not impressed with the look of boyish innocence on Nick's face. "I want to hear everything, down to the tiniest detail."

Nick sat, mentally preparing himself for the interrogation. Most of the time the captain was easily managed, but on occasion Nick had to draw on his sharper wits. The only tricky part of this explanation was the convenience of the murderer's demise. "Well, Captain, it's like this...."

\*

Nick made it home just as dawn was lightening the sky. He took a bottle from the refrigerator and flung himself on the sofa, picking up the remote and lowering the blinds. He assumed Loukas and Maggie were up in the loft, and he briefly opened his senses to confirm their presence.

His gaze rested on the cup Loukas had brought to him and he slowly picked it up, carefully studying the carved features. He poured some of the contents of the bottle into the cup, then paused, staring at it.

"Have you reached a decision?"

He turned to find Loukas standing on the bottom stair coming down from the loft. "I've had other things on my mind."

"Yes, we all have," Loukas admitted, as he stepped down and crossed toward Nick. "Maggie is sleeping. I think she will be all right now, once she has a little time to adjust."

Nick nodded, not looking at him. "They may want her to make a statement at the station tomorrow, if she's up to it."

"All right." Loukas eyed his friend worriedly, then indicated the bottle on the coffee table between them. "May I—?"

"Help yourself," Nick said with a touch of irony, gesturing with the Mayan cup. He looked down into it, swishing the dark liquid around inside it before drinking from it, quickly, as if he was taking a bitter medicine.

Loukas had taken a glass goblet from the cupboard and now he sat on the sofa beside Nick. He poured a modest amount of the red liquid into his glass, then carefully set the bottle back on the table. "Nick—"

"I wanted to kill that man, Loukas," interrupted Nick. "I was *enjoying* his terror." He closed his eyes. "I vowed I would never do it, never become like LaCroix.... I'm tired of this, Loukas. I want to live a mortal's life again, love a mortal woman, hold my child...."

Loukas waited as Nick stopped, then said quietly, "Even at the cost of a human life?"

Nick laughed bitterly. "Yeah, well, I've killed a lot of humans in my time — surely one more won't matter, will it?"

"Are you certain?"

Nick drained the rest of his cupful of cow's blood. "No. But neither are you, are you? I mean, you can call my sort of an existence 'limited' compared to yours, but the fact is you're just as trapped as I am, Loukas. Do you really expect me to believe you're contented as you are, after that little speech of self-pity I heard tonight?"

Loukas stared into the goblet, slowly swirling the liquid. "Everyone has spells of self-pity, even ancient vampires. Yes, I have my regrets from time to time. I regret that I cannot live a normal life with Maggie, that I have taken her life and twisted it. I regret that my love has resulted in such tragedy, and I would have no humanity left in my soul if I did not. Did you wonder why I begged Maggie not to kill, why I did not simply compel her to obey me? It was a test, her first of many, and had she failed she would have been lost to me. Had she given in to the blood lust, she would have been condemned to the existence that you have known. You killed when you Awoke, and condemned yourself without even knowing it. LaCroix knew it, and reveled in it. It can be undone, Nick. You've made a fine start."

"A fine start," Nick sneered.

"Even a baby must crawl before it can run," Loukas said calmly. "One simply cannot just say he is tired of vampiric life and wake up mortal. When was the last time you fed on humans?"

"A century or more."

Loukas smiled and leaned back on the sofa. "You *have* made progress, Nick! Do you honestly believe it is acceptable to take a life to Change yours?"

Nick glanced away, rubbing his upper lip nervously as he considered the question. "No," he said at last, softly.

Loukas nodded thoughtfully. "I didn't think so." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Nick, when I located that cup, there was a codex with it. This is a copy of the text — you do read Mayan glyphs, don't you?"

Nick frowned and accepted the paper, unfolding it with a puzzled glance at his friend. He scanned the writing on it, then read through it more slowly. "It's the ritual for the use of the cups.... 'The Undying One must choose one who is beloved by him, and who knows him for what he is as his last victim. At the place of sacrifice, the victim's throat must be slit and the Cup of Change filled with the lifeblood before the heart ceases beating. The Undying One must pour the blood between the Cup and its mate three times, then drink it before it cools, as the Sun rises above the horizon. The Undying One shall find his mortality with the first ray of sun upon his body.'"

"Rather precise, isn't it?" Loukas said, as Nick stopped, his hand convulsively tightening on the paper. "Now do you see why the Ceremony is not the answer for you, Nick?"

Nick looked at him, then turned his head as the flat door slid open, revealing Natalie in the entrance.

"Nick, is everything all right?" she asked, stepping into the living room.

"Natalie? What are you doing here?"

"... I'm not really sure," she said, looking around as if seeking the answer. "I just had a feeling I should stop by, that you were in trouble."

"A feeling?" Nick repeated, glaring at Loukas.

"Natalie, you're looking lovely," Loukas said, ignoring Nick and taking Natalie's hand and kissing her fingers.

"Everything's fine, Nat, so why don't you go on home?" Nick said rather rudely, pulling her hand from Loukas' and trying to steer her to the door.

"What is wrong with you?" Natalie demanded, struggling in his grasp and slipping free. She stopped, staring at the cup Nick had left on the coffee table. "Is there something I should know?"

"I don't think so," Nick said hastily.

"Don't you need two of those for that ceremony—?"

"There isn't going to be any ceremony," said Nick, "it's nothing but a lot of superstitious rubbish."

He hitched his shoulders up as Natalie turned on him with an astonished look.

"But, Nick, you said you believed—"

"I've changed my mind. Go home, Nat. I'm all right."

"I don't think so. What happened to change your mind? You were so certain— *LaCroix* was so certain that he killed to prevent it. And now you just announce you've changed your mind? What did Loukas tell you? I thought he was all set to perform the ceremony for you—"

"Well, he isn't going to now," Nick cut in, eyes hard as sapphires. "I don't want to go through with it."

"I don't understand—"

"Natalie."

Loukas' voice silenced her, and she turned to look at him. "You look tired. Here, sit down and rest a moment."

Gaze fastened on Loukas' face, Natalie sank down on the sofa.

"What have you done to her?! What right did you have to call her here?! You swore you would never abuse her!"

"Calm down, Nicholas. I regret if my actions seem abusive, but it was necessary for Natalie to be present. And in fact, I am keeping my promise not to hurt her by protecting her from the truth of this conversation. You know the requirements for the ceremony, and I believe Natalie fits the description."

"Damn you, Loukas, I told you I don't intend to—" Nick erupted, breaking off as he swooped down and picked up the Mayan cup. He hurled it against the floor, shattering it. "There. Are you satisfied now?!"

"Are you?"

Nick stared at him, then looked at the shards of pottery at his feet. He blinked, and the faint tinge of yellow in his eyes faded as he raised his head. "I suppose I must be, mustn't I?" He knelt before Natalie, who had leaned her head back against the sofa and closed her eyes. "Loukas, you've made your point. But did you have to use Natalie as a pawn?" He stroked the sleeping woman's cheek. "She begged me to Convert her brother — then she had to watch me destroy him when he couldn't handle the Power."

Loukas' eyes darkened with compassion. "I didn't know that. No wonder you were so angry with me, Nick."

"Still am," Nick said, meeting his gaze. But an ironic twist of his mouth softened his words. "Loukas, it's finished. You can take Maggie home and start over with her. I'm not about to hurt Natalie any more than I already have."

Loukas placed a hand on Nick's shoulder. "I didn't show you the entire codex transcript. You've passed the test, Nick."

Nick raised his head to meet Loukas' gaze. "What?"

"Had you been willing to go through with the ceremony, you would have condemned yourself. You have proven that you still have humanity in your heart, that you can be human. I don't know how quickly it will happen, how long it will last, but it *can* happen, Nicholas. I regret what I put you through, what I have done to Natalie, but I was only doing what I thought you wanted."

Nick stood up. "I don't understand. What do you mean, I passed the test?"

Loukas sighed but said patiently, "The codex went on to specify that the ceremony had to be performed during the vampire's natural lifespan. If performed later than that, he would regain his mortality — and instant death. If, however, the vampire refused the Cup of Change, then he would prove himself worthy of the gift of humanity, and the gods would bestow it on him."

"More mysticism?" queried Nick, reluctant to hope again. "Loukas, I really don't want to play your games anymore—" He stopped, his hand going to his forehead. "I'm...dizzy." He swayed, steadied by the elder vampire's grasp on his arm.

Nick let Loukas ease him down on the couch. "I feel...strange...weak... Loukas, don't leave me!" "I'm here, Nick. It's all right."

"All right? You don't know if I'll Change — and survive it — or how long it will last and you say it's all right?!" Nick clutched at Loukas' arm, his fingers digging in.

"Mortality was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"But I wanted to live to enjoy it."

Loukas smiled despite himself, and held onto his friend as he convulsed suddenly. "Nick, if anyone deserves to live to enjoy it, you do. The gods may insist upon their fun, but they will be just."

"You're still a heathen, Loukas Alexandre," Nick said, gasping as another spasm of pain hit him.

"Then I'll pray to your God for you," the dark-haired vampire assured him. He glanced over at Natalie. "It's time for Natalie to do her part."

"Her part? Besides being a pawn?"

"You'll need a guide, a companion if in fact you are Changing. Don't you think I have done enough? And I do have to contend with Maggie's trauma. Just as I was the catalyst for Maggie's Change, so is Natalie for you. You yearned for it centuries ago, but it is because of Natalie that you are able to do it now."

"You start this and then just leave?" Nick doubled over, clutching his middle.

"I'll not be far, but there is little I can do now. I have not been mortal in twenty-five hundred years; there are things I have forgotten or may have never known. You will either survive the Change and have to deal with your new mortality, or...."

"Or it won't be a problem," Nick finished with a wry twist of his lips.

"*I am* sorry, Nick, but I believed it was what you wanted." Loukas paused, tilting his head toward the loft. "Maggie's awake."

Nick's only answer was a stifled cry of pain.

Natalie started awake, looking at Nick in alarm. "Nick! What's wrong?!" She caught hold of his shoulders and looked into his face, then glared at Loukas. "What have you done to him?!"

"Not his fault," Nick gasped. He tried to smile as he went on, "I wished for something — now I'm getting it!"

"What? Nick, what's going on?" She placed her fingers against his neck, frowning at the rapidity of his pulse. "Loukas, help him!"

"I can't, Natalie," the dark-haired vampire said seriously. "He's crossing back over to your world, becoming a mortal man once more. You are the only one who can help him now." With that, he crossed to the staircase and called, "Maggie, stay calm! I am here."

Natalie watched in utter astonishment as Loukas started up the stairs toward a small woman who stood midway down, watching with frightened eyes. "All right," she said decisively, turning to Nick. "You're going to be fine, Nick. Here, lie down...." She urged him onto his back and pulled an afghan over him. He was shivering now, and his eyes were closed, but his hand sought hers and clung tightly. "I'm scared, Nat," he whispered.

"You and me both," she said, squeezing his hand. "Come on, Nick, don't give up now! You're not the type."

Loukas and Maggie looked down at the couple from the middle of the staircase. "What's happening to him?" Maggie asked.

"I'm not certain," Loukas admitted. "A miracle, perhaps."

Maggie stumbled against Loukas and he wrapped his arms around her. "I'm hungry," she whispered, clutching at him.

"Refrigerator," Nick said to Natalie.

"What?"

"Maggie needs what's in the refrigerator," he repeated, making a move to get up.

"All right, I'll get it," Natalie said, pushing him down. "That's just like you, Nick, thinking about someone else. Look at you and here you are worrying about some woman's breakfast." She went over to the refrigerator and yanked the door open, then looked at Nick. "There's only your...your..."

"It's what Maggie needs," Nick said, fighting the pain gripping him. "With any luck, I won't."

Natalie pulled out two bottles and carried them over to Loukas, giving Maggie a curious look.

"Maggie and I shall be upstairs, should you need me," he said to Natalie as he nudged Maggie up the stairs.

But Maggie resisted, looking at Natalie. "Who are you?"

"I'm Natalie Lambert," she offered. "You must be Maggie Jordan."

The other woman smiled wanly. "I suppose I must, though I don't much feel like her just now."

Loukas said, "Maggie, you need to rest—"

Maggie ignored him. "Are you a friend of Nick's?"

"Yeah," said Natalie. "I am."

"Good," commented Maggie, glancing at the detective, who was lying on his side on the couch now, his complexion chalky. "He needs one." She turned to Loukas and let him guide her the rest of the way upstairs.

Natalie hurried back to Nick. "What does it feel like? What's the pain like — is it localized?"

"Hurts...everywhere," he said with an effort. "My stomach...head...." Nick squeezed his eyes shut. "Is this what a junkie goes through in the drunk tank, Nat?"

"Could be," Natalie told him, touching his cheek, then grasping his wrist and looking at her watch to time his pulse. "Maybe you are going through a kind of withdrawal, Nick."

He shivered, his teeth chattering, and Natalie tucked the afghan around him more securely, then hurriedly found another blanket and two bath towels to pile on top of him. "We've got to keep you warm," she murmured. "Nick, do you have a heating pad?"

"Bathroom," he mumbled.

When she returned with it, he was unconscious. Natalie adjusted the pad at Nick's feet, set the temperature, then sat on the floor and held his hands, chafing the ice-cold skin to keep the blood circulating. "Nick Knight, you are *not* going to die on me, do you hear?! I'm going to have one patient who lives, even if they take away my M.E. for it!"

She continued her efforts to raise his body temperature by applying warm cloths to his skin, and gradually Nick's shivering lessened and his color improved. Eventually, he opened his eyes and looked at her, then sighed and burrowed deeper under the blankets she had piled on him. Once Natalie was certain he was sleeping as comfortably as possible, she made herself a cup of tea, from the stash of tea bags she had left in his cupboard, then settled down in an armchair to keep vigil.

Natalie's late shift and lack of sleep finally caught up with her, and she dozed off. She started awake hours later to find the sun shining in her eyes. "What's... Nick! Get away from the window!"

Nick turned from the open blind. "Nat, it's all right. Look...." He extended his hand towards the midday sun streaming in through the glass pane. He flexed his fingers, which remained whole and unaffected. Nick grinned at her. "It's happened! It's finally happened! I had forgotten how warm the sun could be...."

Natalie grabbed his hand, carefully studying the flesh for any signs of burns. Turning the fingers over in her hands, she looked at him in awe and said, "It's true. The sun isn't hurting you, Nick!" Half laughing, half crying, Natalie threw her arms around him.

Nick returned the embrace, and before he knew it, he was kissing Natalie... and she was fervently returning the kiss. Simultaneously they became aware of the embrace and broke apart, both embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." Nick began.

"It's all right, I shouldn't have..." Natalie said in unison with Nick. They stopped self-consciously.

"Well," she said, giving a little shrug. "You're cured! What do you want to do next?"

His blue eyes sparkled. "Anything! Everything!" He spun around, his arms spread wide to the sunlight, then paused and looked at the wooden case which contained Joan of Arc's cross. Nick walked over and lifted the case's lid, then reverently took the simple cross into his hands. He bowed his head over

it, and his lips moved.

Natalie's eyes misted at that, and she scrubbed at them furiously, staying quite still until he had finished and placed the cross back into its case. Smiling through her tears, she went to Nick's side and put her hand on his arm. "Well, I don't know about you, but I could use something to eat right about now! Want to escort me to lunch, Nick?"

He looked astonished at the notion. "I'm hungry," he admitted, "really hungry — for food!" He laughed and arched an eyebrow. "What about that Spaghetti Factory you're always mentioning?"

Natalie shook her head. "You're not ready for Italian food yet, Nick, it's too spicy. How about a nice bowl of chicken soup and some crackers?"

"You're the doctor," Nick said, grinning like an idiot.

"There's a deli that makes wonderful soup—"

"Then let's go!"

"Nick—"

"Aw, come on, Nat," Nick said, taking her hands and pulling her toward the door. "You always said that if I minded my manners, someday you'd let me take you out to dinner."

"So I did," Natalie said, laughing.

"Nick."

Loukas' solemn voice intruded on their giddy happiness. "Keep your head about you," he continued when they looked up at him. "Take things easy and remember that I have made no guarantees. This has never succeeded before so I have no way of knowing how long it will last. It could be forever, it could be tomorrow. For your sake, I hope it is forever, but I have no control over it."

"Nick, is it true? You've found your dream?" Maggie asked, standing on the step below Loukas.  
"Feels that way," Nick said and a beautiful smile lit her face.

"I'm happy for you," she said, coming down the steps and standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

"Thank you, Maggie," he said, his eyes shadowed as he clasped her hands. "I'm sorry I didn't take better care of you—"

She smiled and shook her head. "It was my fault, Nick. And I have no regrets."

"I certainly hope not," Loukas said dryly, coming to stand beside them. Maggie sent him a glance of mock exasperation, then went into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist.

Natalie looked at them, an eyebrow arched. "Loukas, we never did have that little talk of ours...."

"Talk? What talk?" Maggie asked, looking up at Loukas inquiringly.

"Dr. Lambert took blood and tissue samples, in an effort to help Nick," Loukas began, smiling down at her and gently brushing the curls at her temple. "She wanted to ask questions, once she'd had a chance to run some tests. There are — *were* — many differences between those of my blood and those of Nick's, and she was hoping to find something in our nature to assist Nick. Perhaps now those questions are no longer necessary."

"Ah-hah," Natalie said, with a dubious expression that Nick recognized from his various attempts to fool her with half-truths. "Well, we can always hope, can't we — *Mister Alexandre*."

"Hope is a wonderful thing, Doctor," Loukas said, flashing a smile at her.

"What *is* going on?" Maggie demanded, looking from Natalie to Loukas. "It's more than some medical tests, isn't it? Was she one of your flings? Is that what I'm sensing, some underlying sexual thing between you and Natalie? Are you using her?"

"Maggie, you know it isn't like that," Loukas began in a placating manner. "I explained my needs to you when we first came together—"

"Needs? I was a need?"

"Natalie, I don't think he meant—" Nick began, grabbing her by the shoulders and holding her back.

"He called me a need, Nick! Like I was a bottle of milk or something!" Natalie was incensed.

Maggie, her suspicions verified, started to speak, but stopped as Loukas said quietly,

"I never meant for you to feel that way, Natalie. I am sorry if my actions have hurt you. I promised Nick I would not hurt you, but he knew better. It was not intentional, I swear. My judgement was faulty,



and both you and Maggie are paying the price. I wish I could undo the damage I have done. I wish I could make right all that I have destroyed, but I fear we have seen our share of miracles."

A knowing look passed between Maggie and Natalie. "I suppose it might be better to discuss it later, when our tempers are cooler," Maggie said, with a lift of one shoulder.

"I want to 'discuss' this now!" Natalie said, breaking loose from Nick and poking a finger in Loukas' chest. "You used me, you used Maggie, you even used Nick. Is it some sort of power play, Loukas? Do you enjoy manipulating people?"

"It may appear that way, but I was only trying to help Nick," Loukas said gently. "I wanted to make up for my previous failure."

"Yeah, well, failure seems to be about the only thing you're good at, doesn't it?"

"That's enough, Nat," Nick said hastily, looking at Loukas. "I thought you wanted to go to lunch—"

The elder vampire's composure faltered, hurt and anger flickering in his eyes. "If I thought that, I would have given up a thousand years ago. The ability to fail, and recognize one's failures, is what defines a human. I apologize to you all. What more do you want from me, Natalie?"

"Oh, I suppose a pound of flesh might be a place to start," she said after a moment, a smile lurking around the corners of her mouth.

He blinked, looked from her to Maggie, who was already smiling, and then at Nick, who exchanged a 'what-can-you-do?' glance with him over Natalie's head. "I'll take it under consideration," he said solemnly, a twinkle in his eyes.

"But I get to pick which pound," Maggie said, placing a possessive hand on Loukas' arm.

Loukas sighed long-sufferingly. "Do you want to sharpen the knife, Nick?"

"I want food," Nick said, taking a firm hold of the medical examiner's hand. "Lunch, Natalie. You and me. My treat. Now."

She allowed him to drag her through the doorway. "All right, we'll have lunch, Nick. And then we're going to stop by the office and you're going to let me do a full checkup on you."

"I feel fine," he protested.

"We have absolutely no idea what's going on here, and I want to make sure you're all right."

"But, Nat...."

Loukas closed the door on the argument, and turned to see Maggie watching him with folded arms. "So. Want to tell me about it?"

"Of course," he said, smiling charmingly. "Shall we go back upstairs, Magpie?" He kissed her in a calculatingly distracting manner.

"No, I think we've imposed on Nick's hospitality long enough," Maggie said, slipping from his embrace.

"This evening, then, but we cannot leave before dark," Loukas told her. "It's too soon for you to attempt sunlight. You are but newly Changed, little love, and you must give yourself time to adapt. You must learn the limitations of this life and how to deal with them."

"But—"

"I have had twenty-five hundred years to develop a tolerance for the sun. It will not take you that long, but it would not be wise to take chances."

Maggie suddenly looked like a lost little girl. "Oh Loukas—"

"We will see this through together, Magpie. I was wrong to think I could just walk away from you. For centuries I have envied Nicholas Tannek his good fortune in finding his soulmate and yet I have very nearly turned away from my own. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, Maggie?"

"When you look at me with those soulful eyes, how can I not?" she said with a soft smile, stroking his cheek with one hand.

Loukas caught her hand, kissed the palm and then drew her to him in a crushing embrace. "It will not be an easy life," he warned, kissing her.

"Nothing worth having is ever easy," she returned as they sank down onto the sofa.

\*

They sat at a table in a small, crowded restaurant and Nick's head swung back and forth as he watched the noonday crowd. "Is it always this noisy?" he asked Natalie after she'd given their order.

"No, it's usually worse, but the lunch rush is about over," she said, smiling at his delight.

"Nat, have I ever told you how much I value all you've done for me, how you've stood by me?"

"No, I don't believe you have," she said, propping her elbows on the table and resting her chin on the backs of her hands. "We have a little time before our order arrives, though."

Nick grinned and reached across the table to brush a finger across her cheek.

"In all seriousness, though, we've got a lot of work ahead of us," she said, drawing back from his touch. "I want to do a series of tests, see if I can determine if this is permanent or if there is something I can do to make it so. And you have so much to adjust to, Nick—"

"I'll be fine, Nat, really," he assured her. "Especially with you to look after me!" He grinned and added, "Can we go for a walk in the park after lunch?"

He looked so much like an eager six-year old that Nat couldn't say no. "Sure, Nick." But her eyes held a shadow of worry as she watched him lean back in his chair, obviously enjoying the challenge of readjusting to a daylight life. For his sake, she hoped it would last.

- The End -

[The tale of Nick Knight's first meeting with Loukas — during Medieval times — and his attempt to separate Nicholas and Varina "for their own good" appeared in *Good Guys Wear Fangs 2*.]



## **MIRROR IMAGE**

*by Denysé M. Bridger*

**Natalie:**

**My soul.**  
The elusive and fragile essence of all that I am.  
All that I was before you.  
Now, you are that soul.

**Emptiness.**  
An emotion more familiar to me than happiness could ever be.  
Until you.  
Your happiness defined mine.

**Loss.**  
How was I to know what you would take from me?  
The cost of loving you was everything.  
I paid it willingly.

**Sorrow.**  
Has become my name.  
The heart I did not know I possessed was given life in your eyes.  
And taught death by your denial.

**Nicholas:**

**My soul.**  
*The strength and security that makes me what I am.  
All that I have been since you.  
You are that soul completed.*

**Emptiness.**  
*Once such an intimate and hated companion.  
Until You.  
No longer an acquaintance even.*

**Loss.**  
*All that you take without malice.  
Is everything I have wanted to give.  
And there is no fear.*

**Sorrow.**  
*Once my name.  
The voice of a loneliness I refused to acknowledge.  
Banished forever by the beat of your heart.*

## *Longing for the Sun*

*by Lisa Savignano*

*I can see it now in my memory:  
a perfect golden orb  
floating in a sea of blue.*

*But I scarcely remember  
how good the warmth felt on my skin  
or the way the light sparkled on the water.*

*All my undeath has been a longing  
for that most perfect light.  
More than once I have risked true death  
to catch a glimpse of its radiant beauty.*

*Yet, the night pulls me with unexpected strength.  
The moon has become my only light  
and the darkness around me is no match  
for the darkness within me,  
the darkness that yearns once more for light.*

*Often, I tire of my existence,  
years of darkness, the night neverchanging.  
That is when my... need... is strongest  
and I take such deadly risks.*

*And if I chose to end it,  
to go on with life no more,  
I know the way I'll do it,  
the way I'll end my pain.*

*I'll chose a cloudless night,  
and go up to the hills.  
The fog will mist around me  
and I'll sit and wait alone.*

*As dawn touches the sky,  
I'll watch in silent wonder,  
hearing birds stir and sing  
to send me on my way.*

*And just before the light shines  
over those distant, silent mountains,  
I'll make my peace with god and self  
and wait to see the sun.*

*It looks like it's going to be a perfect day.*

## *Apricots and Mortal Tears*

by

*Apache*

[ "Apricots and Mortal Tears" is an epilog to the episode "Fever," gratefully dedicated by the author to Gillian Horvath. In this episode, Nick's partner Tracy believes that her friend Vachon has succumbed to a mysterious plague fatal only to vampires. This tale first appeared in the fkfic-l email list, and is reprinted here with the author's permission.]

I did what he wanted. I left. I ran out of there like I was the one who'd burst into flames if I didn't get home before the sun came up.

I made it all the way into my apartment on that outburst of energy, walked in — and started seeing every visit he'd ever made. Vachon stooped over to look at zucchini and radicchio and yogurt and tomatoes and oranges and soda in my fridge; Vachon leaning on the counter and staring down at my hips and thighs, imagining, and remembering something he refused to tell me; Vachon the one time he decided to cruise into my bedroom to see what it looked like, picking up my old stuffed animals and turning to face me without a word, just a quizzical, teasing look. Vachon on the sofa, where I could never really get him to settle in and stay and talk like I wanted...

The sofa is where I threw myself down and let the tears come. They kept coming all day.

I've seen death; it goes with being a cop. I'm not good at it, though. It still upsets me even when it's a total stranger who's sprawled on the street with a look of terrible surprise frozen into his eyes, or a pretty girl just going cool, with one pathetically naked foot poking out from under the crime scene sheet, or a carefully investigated body at the morgue.

And this was Vachon not dead, Vachon with his incomprehensible five-hundred-year-old personality shining out of a young man's humorous eyes. A Vachon who couldn't even lift his hands any more to tweak my hair. Vachon who had saved my life for a fourth and last time that very day — protecting me from himself.

And I let him order me out of there so he could die alone. "You don't want to see this, Trace" — Is he going to burn? Turn into smoke? Suddenly look like the four hundred ninety-one years old that he really is? But he wanted me gone, and his desire got the better of my selfish desire to stay, to cling, to try to help according to my idea of helpfulness, and I got out.

I cried, wondering: Is it now? Is this the moment he dies? Did it happen an hour ago?

When I ran out of tears, I just lay there, like you do when you're too sick to even want to move. After a while, I was able to cry again, and did. I saw the light change as the day waxed and waned, looked at my watch occasionally and noticed the hours were going by without really feeling the time pass.

I called in another personal day. I didn't want to show up at the precinct. I didn't want to face Nick's abstractions or his little jokes or his blue moods or whatever he was going to be today. I didn't give a rat's ass about the Wyatt case, or whether Natalie figured out I stole two pints of blood and reported me. I didn't want to explain to her, or Nick, or Reese, or anyone why I blew off a hot homicide investigation. I didn't want to talk to another human being.

And there was only one vampire I wanted to talk to, and he had died this afternoon.

The hours rolled by, and the sky went black outside. In the past five months, I've come to look at night skies differently; somehow they mean good exciting possibilities — night is Vachon's time, he might be around, something could happen, who knows? So now I looked at his black half of the daily round and thought of night without him, city lights with no possibility of a Spanish vampire flying around unseen, someone who could turn up with the cold breath of night air and his long hair wild with what the wind did to it while he flew. Dead night.

Eventually, I sat up. Inertia is foreign to me, really, so I sat up for no reason the same way I'd been lying still for no reason. I was cried out, and felt hot and cracked and brittle. I still didn't want anything except to see Vachon. I was too tired to think anything else. Someone should take care of him. Who would bury him? Why after five hundred years was he so alone?

Well. Screed had been on his own, too, except for Vachon happening to show up with me. Maybe that's what vampires all are, lone wolves. Maybe that's why Vachon said that thing about burying mortal friends; maybe vampires...can't be friends with each other? He never told me, and now I'd never know. But a mortal friend could return the favor on behalf of the others, just once.

So I picked up my coat and my car keys from where I dropped them, and walked out to my car, and drove over to the church.

No lights. No candles. All disarray; it had looked like he was moving anyway, but I had been too focused on him being sick to ask. He'd put a bed where one of the statues used to be...a bed to die in.

"Vachon?" Nothing. I hadn't expected... but now I realized I'd hoped. I listened as hard as I could, but there was no rasping breath, no rustle, no anything.

I had a good flashlight with me, so the problem wasn't lack of light, it was lack of will. I couldn't bring myself to pull the beam up onto the bed. It had been such a normal bed, upper sheet, lower sheet, nice red wool blanket, pillows in crispy white cases... My Mom would make a bed like that. (So what did you expect, Trace? Dirt in a coffin? An antique four-poster and medieval tapestries? Black silk sheets?)

A minute later, I found the will to do it. I did it like a cop, just lifted my wrist, played the beam in a crescent, the regular sweep of an illum pattern... Oh, my God.

Nothing there. Just blankets and sheets.

My breath seized up, but I made myself walk over and look. Nothing. No trace. No ash, no scorch marks, no bones, no ... nothing.

And the tears came again. Of all the stupid things, I had wanted one more little bit of Vachon. Just to bury him, just to care for his body, even if I had to do it in some terrible secret way. Just so he could be a little bit taken care of. I leaned over on that bed and cried like a little girl.

There were a couple of hairs on the pillow. Had other vampires come and taken him away? Why hadn't they come to keep him company instead? "Our community...us" — had they flickered in to carry off the last of him to some kind of vampire...what? Cemetery? Funeral pyre? There were no clues, just the two strands of black hair. I took them, and that was the last of the man I had seen blink his eyes open for a split second amid the wreckage of a Boeing 707.

At home, all I felt was exhaustion. I didn't want to die with him, do some exotic swan dive off my balcony for love... I would have liked to be able to go to a memorial, or write my name in some book of people who had loved Javier Vachon, or could have loved him; I would have liked to be able to tell stories at a wake, but those were just tired, sad feelings, not the passionate grief that had been working its way out earlier.

I went back to the sofa, lay down on it again, and was asleep in less than a minute.

I don't know how long it was before I woke up. That sixth sense woke me, you know, the thing that tells you in the dark that nothing has happened but something has *happened*? I woke up wary, instinctively working on where my gun was, stretching my senses into the dark trying to figure out what it was.

There was cold air in the room. There shouldn't have been. I don't leave any windows cracked

for fresh air in January.

And maybe I heard a breath? or just a curtain in that little drift of air?

I slid backwards off the couch ultra-quietly, and got my gun out of my coat pocket. I'd carried it when I went over to the church, even though bullets and vampires mix just fine.

I stood up. I still really didn't give a damn about anything, but instinct and training will carry you through almost any situation.

I held the gun out two-fisted at where I thought the breath had been. "I'm a police officer." "I know."

A humorous, slightly cracking voice. The only voice... I'm hallucinating. It's a ghost. It's Vachon. It's a dream... I almost fired a few rounds from sheer shock.

He turned on the light. It was him all right...black raincoat, black, messy gorgeous hair... He looked...fine. "Are you a ghost?" My voice came out crooked and squeaky.

He smiled and shook his head slowly side to side. "Sorry. Just a vampire."

I was still pointing the gun at him, and he raised his eyebrows, looking at it. I let my hands drop, but otherwise I couldn't move. Not at all, not my left foot or my right foot or anything. And in my mind, I was running into his arms...

His face shifted from joking to sweet in that instant; it became suffused with the tenderness that he'd shown me while he was immobile, in the hours when he was past hunger, when his voice rattled because of the fluid in his lungs, the hemorrhaging in his throat. His voice now was smooth, quiet, as tender as his eyes.

"My bed smells of apricots and mortal tears," he said.

Oh, god. I still couldn't move. "Someone..." All I could do was whisper. "I wanted..." I frowned hard, trying to find what I wanted to say, but could only get to, "You were alone." It was almost accusing, the way it came out.

He came forward to me then, and wrapped his arms around me, burrowed his nose under my hair; I could hear him inhaling the scent of me over and over, and his breaths blew out softly on my ear, both a tickle and a caress. His arms were locked around me so tight, but it wasn't a crushing embrace; this wasn't that kind of passion, just this absolute holding and breathing me in over and over...and I was still holding the gun, of all the silly things. I flicked it over toward the sofa, not even really caring if it was going to go off, and wrapped my arms around him just as hard and just as softly, and we stood there who knows how long, and every once in a while he'd murmur, "Tracy. Tracy."

- The End -



## **BLOOD GAME**

*by Denysé M. Bridger*

*Heaven in the eyes of a monster  
How many have fallen before you?*

*I want to flee*

*To run from a madness I sense is as imminent as your touch  
You hear the fear within my mind don't you?*

*The answer is in your eyes*

*Those blue oceans that threaten to drown my sanity*

*Death in the arms of evil  
How many have fallen before you?*

*I cling to you*

*Desperate to hold the ecstasy you have taught me  
You heard the surrender long before I knew*

*I read it in your eyes*

*Those glowing fires that seared my soul and claimed my spirit*

*Hunger cloaked in the shadow of night*

*They fall before us now*

*Laughter fills the silent gloom*

*We run as one*

*You teach the blood game well*

*The madness lives within your eyes*

*Those empty, soulless gems that stole my life from me*



## ***Toronto by Night***

*by*

*Marg Baskin*

*[An epilogue to "Strings", although one need not have seen the episode to enjoy the story.]*

You know your life has passed beyond weird when you arrive home to find a vampire in your shower, and the only thing that surprises you is that he's singing "Oh, Fortuna" in a pleasant tenor. I'd never dreamt Vachon could sing — *really* sing, I mean, not the kind of high-volume, low-melody output needed to back a grunge band. Of course, there were a truly infinite number of things I didn't know about Javier Vachon, long-haired, leather-clad, sixteenth century Conquistador and vampire.

Starting with what he was doing in my apartment.

He did *not* have his own key.

I knew why he was in the shower. The abandoned church where he lives doesn't have one, so it wasn't the first time he'd dropped by to clean up. It *was* the first time he'd done it when I wasn't home, and I couldn't say I was pleased. I wasn't in a mood to be pleased by much of anything right then, having just spent three hours with my father, convincing him I had every intention of staying in homicide no matter what it did — or didn't do — for my career. Not one of the high points of my life.

Just in case Vachon hadn't heard me arrive — fat chance — I slammed the front door harder than necessary, and began clattering around in the kitchenette, making myself a mug of tea I didn't want. The shower turned off, and minutes later I heard the soft pad of bare feet on carpet. Presumably the footsteps were an appeasement. When he isn't making conscious concessions to the mortal world, Vachon moves in *utter* silence. He loves to sneak up on me, just to see how high he can make me jump.

"Hey, Trace, you're home early."

"I wasn't on shift tonight," I replied without turning around.

"Hey, Trace, you're home late," he amended, his voice alight with humor.

I poured my tea, and finally turned to face him. Vachon was standing on the far side of the kitchen island, dressed as I expected — jeans, period. One of my towels was draped casually over his head, but water still flowed from the tendrils of hair plastered to his shoulders. The moisture formed seed-pearls on the tips of the ebony tangles, then broke free to glide down the lean landscape of his torso. I watched one trail slowly downward until it vanished into the waistband of his jeans, then developed an interest in finding the partly sliced lemon I knew was somewhere in the fridge.

As my fingers closed over a ziplock baggy stuffed with lemon slices, I remembered I ought to be yelling at him for committing break-and-enter, not daydreaming about the taste of that pale skin.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, straightening up again.

"Um." He flapped the ends of the towel at me vaguely and said, "Taking a shower?" as if it were a question.

"I mean in my apartment. And, by the way, just how did you get *into* my apartment?"

"Your superintendent has a pass key."

"Mr. Faroud let you in?" I demanded, outraged.

"Sure. Don't worry. He doesn't know he did it."

That, of course, was supposed to reassure me.

"Just great. I'm not going to find teeth marks in Mr. Faroud, am I?"

"Would I do that?" He looked mildly indignant, then his big brown eyes went all warm and concerned. Vampires live by some sort of arcane Code, but I don't suppose it says anything about playing fair when arguing with a mortal.

"What's wrong, Tracy?"

"What's *wrong*? I come home to find you've whammied my superintendent, broken into my apartment, run up my hot water bill..." I trailed off, took a deep breath and asked, "It shows, huh?"

"Oh, yes," Vachon returned, mouthing the words silently rather than saying them. It's an idiosyncrasy I find utterly charming, even when I'm not in a mood to be charmed, and it had the usual effect. A few of the knots in my shoulder muscles untied themselves, my stomach settled down a little, and my knees went just the tiniest bit wobbly.

Vachon frowned, an expression which turns his heavy brows into an unbroken "V" above his nose. He didn't look annoyed, so I assumed he was thinking.

"Have dinner with your family?" he ventured.

Since I'd already told him I wasn't working tonight, that was the logical next guess for anyone who had known me longer than five minutes.

"I had dinner with Dad," I corrected automatically, then realized Dad pretty much was "my family" in that context now that he and Mom were separated. Six weeks, and the concept still didn't feel real to me. I couldn't even decide if I was sorry or glad the delusion had finally fallen apart.

That line of thought was abruptly overridden by the memory of Dad trying to invite himself over after dinner. He'd claimed he wanted to see how the apartment was shaping up, but since I'd been living there nearly a year it was a feeble excuse. What he really wanted was an opportunity to continue an argument he had, for once in my life, lost.

I must have blanched at the mental image of Police Commissioner Richard Vetter finding a man — *any* man — in his daughter's shower, because Vachon asked, "You sure you're okay, Trace?" in a genuinely concerned tone.

"I'm fine. I just need a few minutes to unwind." I extracted the bag from my overly brewed tea, threw it away, and carried the tea to the couch.

Having given me my vicarious thrill for the evening, Vachon wandered back into my bedroom to finish dressing. I suppose I should be furious at him for doing that to me all the time, but there's no maliciousness in it. I don't even think there's any vanity. Like sneaking up behind me, it's just an amusing way to throw me off balance, and when you're four-hundred-eighty-something going on twenty, you must take your amusements where you can find them.

When he came back into the living room, he forgot — or chose not to remember — to make noise. A pair of arms simply appeared, folded along the back of the couch, and he rested his chin on them about the same time I finished starting. Tilting his head to the side, he gazed at me, waiting for me to yell at him. I didn't, so eventually he bounced to his feet, vaulted over the back of the couch, and landed gracefully on the cushions beside me. I used to know a Labrador Retriever that did the same thing, but at least Vachon doesn't leave hair on the furniture. Well, actually, he does but it goes away as soon as the sun comes up.

He lounged back, arms stretched out along the cushions, the fingers of one hand lacing themselves automatically around a swatch of my hair. For some odd reason, Vachon loves my hair, perhaps because it's an indirect way to touch me, a small indulgence that doesn't threaten the comfort of our companionship.

"So," he asked brightly, "what are we up to tonight?"

"We?"

"We, us, you plus me."

"*You* are going home, and *I* am going to bed."

"It's barely ten."

"I'm tired."

"You're grumpy. Besides, if you go to bed now, you'll screw up your sleep cycle."

"Vachon, I've just spent three hours listening to my father tell me how to run my life. No, actually, I've just spend a *week* listening to my father tell me how to run my life. I don't need any more of it right now, especially not from you."

There was a long moment of silence while my rush of anger faded to embarrassment and he just sat there, looking hurt. I don't understand his strange need for my approval, but I don't think it's an act. It really does upset him if I snap when he hasn't set out to provoke me.

"I'm sorry," I said finally. "I shouldn't take it out on you, but it's been a rough night."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"No."

"Okay," he agreed, so casually that I was annoyed he didn't care enough to press the point. If I was feeling *that* childish tonight, maybe I needed to go soak my head for a while. Or go out and play with a vampire.

"Where did you want to go?"

He perked up again immediately. "How about we start at the Eaton's Centre, head north and see what's shaking on Yonge Street?"

The odd drug deal, a few hookers, far too many boom-boxes... "Sure, why not? Just give me a minute, I'll change. Nowhere fancy, I take it?"

He looked down at his own attire — worn black jeans, a flannel work shirt whose fabric had faded to indeterminate blue, and laced-up army boots — then suggested, "Well, we might still catch the last act at the St. Lawrence Centre. I think the Canadian Opera Company is doing *Tristan and Isolde*. I always liked that one."

"Right. Formal attire it is, then."

I changed into jeans and a comfortable pullover sweater, and returned to the living room to find Vachon on his feet, waiting by the door. The Lab did that, too.

"Might as well leave your car," he suggested. "I'll give you a lift to Yonge Street."

"You mean—" Before I could stop myself, my hands made a stupid, fluttery pantomime of flapping wings.

It was too much to hope he'd let me get away with it. Breaking into a broad grin, he said, "Well, actually, I meant on the Triumph, but I suppose we could—"

My abortive hand gesture became a broad pantomime of flight, like a little kid playing airplane. The performance came complete with engine noises and a fluid walk-over of the couch that made me laugh in spite of my cranky mood and the trail of footprints he left on my upholstery.

"You're very strange, Vachon."

"And this surprises you?" he inquired curiously, as he followed me out of the apartment.

We took the Triumph, which he parked in an alley across from the Eaton's Centre. The spot was illegal but I refused to comment and start the inevitable line of meter-maid jokes. It was a minor quibble, anyway, since as far as I know he doesn't have a driver's license — at least, I couldn't find one for "J.D. Valdez" when I tried to track him down that first time.

A January thaw had increased the flotilla of street vendors on the Yonge-Dundas corner to nearly summertime numbers. At one end of the makeshift flea market, a skinny saxophonist was playing jazz and at the other, someone had a stereo booming out rap. I felt a wave of sympathy for the vendors near the middle, where the music fused into jubilant discord.

As he moved up the row, one of Vachon's hands tapped idly against his thigh, keeping rhythm with the saxophone. Sometimes when he does things like that — utterly ordinary — the strangeness of him really hits me. When I was a little girl in school, the story of the Spaniards in the New World seemed like a grand adventure, a tale of fearless explorers venturing into the dangers of the unknown. The way they teach it nowadays, those explorers were a gang of thugs searching for gold, who arrived with their guns and armor and decimated a culture. Whichever way you tell it, it's just dusty history to most people — a few pieces of rusted armor in the museum and the occasional documentary on public television — but

for me that murky past is personified by one dark-eyed Conquistador, still young four centuries after his companions have turned to dust, and presently flirting with the Toronto street vendor who wanted to sell him a braided leather wristband.

Shaking his head over the bracelet, Vachon caught up an earring from her display table and held it up to my ear. It was made of dangling thongs of leather, decorated with silver studs and feathers, typical biker-chick jewelry.

"It just isn't me," I told him, shaking my head. For a moment, I was almost tempted by it, not because I liked it but because it was like nothing I'd ever had or wanted to own. Tonight was my night for rebellion, but not pointless rebellion. I was trying to find myself, not lose me.

He promptly held it up to his own ear, and raised an eyebrow in enquiry.

"No comment." Maybe I should've encouraged him to buy it, just to discover if someone who healed as fast as a vampire could really pierce his ear...

With a shrug and a grin, he returned it to the display and wandered onward. The vendor's eyes trailed after him, enjoying the rear view of short leather jacket and flattering jeans, oblivious to the fact that she'd just had a close encounter with the supernatural. I couldn't envy her the simplicity of her ignorance. Vachon makes my life hopelessly complex, and I love it.

Turning back to see where I'd gotten to, he called, "Find something you like?"

I shook my head and hurried on, catching up with him as he reached the curb and stopped for the light. As it changed to green, his cool fingers caught mine and we walked on hand in hand, a normal couple to the people around us. He loved to play with my hair, but otherwise Vachon never touched me without a reason. Tonight the gesture was part of the game of "let's cheer up Tracy" he was playing, and I appreciated it accordingly. In his own, odd way — probably entirely without realizing it — Vachon has a talent for undemanding support. It meant a lot to me that he gave me the option to refuse it, and took it in stride if I didn't always do so diplomatically.

"Are we actually going anywhere?" I inquired, a block or two farther north.

"Do you have to be going somewhere every minute of your life, Trace?"

Seems to me I'd discussed this very topic with my father, a couple of hours previously.

"Well, I have a lot fewer minutes to waste than you do," I threw back, then regretted the words as soon as they were spoken. We don't talk about it, but it's always there in the background, the difference between his eternity and my mortality. In the beginning the importance wasn't real to me, but as time passes, it's starting to sink in. He has all the time in the world. I don't.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it that way."

"Why not? It's the truth." He didn't look at me. *Good going, Vetter. He's really going out of his way to cheer you up, and you're depressing him instead.*

"I really am sorry, Vachon. It hasn't exactly been a good month for me." He didn't need to ask why. I usually keep my family problems to myself, but somehow I'd ended up telling him about my parents' split the night after Mom walked out. I'd probably tell him the tale of my brief stint in corporate crime, too, once I'd cooled down. He didn't seem to mind listening, and talking to him was comfortable. I didn't have to worry that what I said would be used against me, or even passed along. It was hard to picture him gossiping about me to Screech.

"I got myself worked up into a nice adversarial mood so I could face Dad," I explained, "and it takes a while to wear off."

"You're always in an adversarial mood, Trace." He sounded horribly ill-used, but there was humor beneath the complaint.

"I am not."

"Are too."

"I refuse to play along with this."

"See?"

We passed a storefront whose doors were thrown wide to the winter night. The interior was a pandemonium of blinking lights and jarring sounds, which swept around me unexpectedly as Vachon changed direction and pulled me through the opening. Two steps inside, he stopped to reconnoiter.

I swept my eyes around the video arcade, then said, "You're joking, right?" without much hope.

Wagging a finger in front of my nose, he gave me a wicked smile and admonished, "Don't tell me you're too old for this stuff."

"I hate video games. I can't play video games. It's a waste of quarters."

He fished in a pocket, caught my hand and pressed a half-dozen coins into my palm. "Nothing to lose. They aren't your quarters."

"This should keep me amused for, oh, about three minutes."

"Hey, don't worry, I'll protect my investment. Come on."

He zeroed in on some game whose name I didn't catch and tugged me with him. A couple of teenagers were playing it, but they turned and left a few seconds before Vachon reached them.

"Vachon, did you—?"

"What?"

"Oh, never mind." I looked at a control panel that could have launched a space shuttle. "What am I supposed to do?"

I'm not sure why I bothered to ask. I got six weeks of video game flight school in one 30-second burst, then he had quarters in the machine and was happily saving the universe from some computer-generated menace with two sets of controls, one of them nominally mine. The management must have hated him. Even with a major handicap — me — he could probably entertain himself for hours on one set of coins. I thought it amazingly rash to make such a public display of vampire speed, but a surreptitious study of our surroundings told me he wasn't attracting any attention. Either I was encircled by video game junkies with fangs, or he was limiting his reaction time to just slightly better than that of the average adolescent.

"You're not getting into the spirit of this, Trace."

"I don't have a clue what I'm doing." I snatched my fingers back as he slapped a button on my side of the board with the flat of his palm, saving the little digitally-generated me from certain death. Great. Even in virtual reality I needed people to save me. "How about I wait outside?"

I retreated to the peaceful chill of the sidewalk, half-turned and collided with his chest.

"I didn't mean *you* had to stop."

"Doesn't matter." His shoulders rose in an indifferent shrug. "There are plenty of nights when I don't have anything better to do."

That could possibly be construed as a compliment. Maybe.

"So what do you want to do?" he inquired.

"I...don't know," I admitted reluctantly. We'd known each other six months, but we were still learning how to socialize. I enjoyed his company and he apparently enjoyed mine but, quite apart from tiny little things like the differences in our ages and diets, we didn't have a lot in common. "It's too late to go to a movie."

"Okay, how about this. If you were standing here and now, alone, where would you go? *Home* is not a valid answer," he added, just before I'd said the word.

I looked up and down the street, which was still busy and lively in spite of the hour. There's a little bit of everything on that section of Yonge Street — restaurants, sex shops, stereo bargain houses, you name it. For lack of a better inspiration, I pointed at a three-story-tall neon sign designed to look like a spinning record. "Sam's?"

"Music is good," he agreed and jaywalked across the street, following the example of other pedestrians who were ignoring the crosswalk twenty steps farther north.

"What kind of music do you like?" he inquired, when I caught up with him at the front of the store.

"Um." Dad likes country-and-western, and one of my few lifelong acts of rebellion is to hate the stuff. Mom prefers classical, which puts me to sleep. I pretty much listen to whatever comes on the radio, unless it's deadly dull or horribly loud, but I don't have much in the way of strong preferences.

"That would have been my first guess."

"What?" For an instant, I had the awful fear that he'd been listening in on my train of thought.

I didn't *think* Vachon could read minds, but I'd never had the nerve to actually ask him.

"Um'," he repeated patiently. "I knew you didn't like music. I've seen your stereo."

"What's wrong with my stereo?"

"You picked it out the same day you bought your car."

We'd had *that* discussion already.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with a Ford Taurus. It's a good, practical city car."

"My point exactly," he agreed with that gorgeous, infuriating grin.

"I really should have given you a sunlamp for Christmas," I muttered.

His grin grew wider, so he'd heard me, but he didn't respond, just pushed his way into the mass of people cramming the music store's interior. When we'd found a pocket alcove that wasn't occupied, he turned and surveyed me up and down, as though measuring me for a suit or a coffin.

"What?"

"I'm deciding what you'd like."

"I'll decide what I like, thank you very much."

"Go for it," he agreed without hesitation.

I looked around indecisively, not particularly wishing to discover he considered Sarah McLaughlin and Christie Black about as exciting as the Taurus. "Oh, why don't we just go home? This isn't working."

The teasing humor left his eyes, and one of his hands slipped into my hair, the tip of his finger outlining my ear with a gentle caress. "Relax, Tracy. Give it time... Come on—" He extended his hand again— "Let's go find something I like while you're deciding."

It's stupid to measure Vachon by his looks or his wardrobe, but I do it anyway because I have no better gauge. Maybe I do it partly as a defense mechanism to keep from remembering what he *really* is, what he's done in his centuries-long life, what he could do to me if he chose.

I followed him through the store expecting to end up in alternative rock. Instead, I got a whirlwind musical odyssey while he poked through racks of CDs in every part of the store, listening to the sampler packs himself or stuffing headphones over my ears to play me a medley of Baroque harpsichord and smoky jazz, world music and the Rolling Stones. We even hit opera, so maybe he wasn't joking when he said he liked *Tristan and Isolde*.

A couple of hours later, he watched me while I listened to a clear, male voice sing a madrigal, and asked, "Well? Like it?"

"It's beautiful. What it is?"

"About three hundred years older than I am."

"Music goes that far back?" Okay, on an obviousness scale of one to ten, it rated an eleven. So sue me.

He blinked big, dark eyes at me, feigning astonishment that I comprehended the possibility of teasing him. "Carved the instruments out of bone, I guess."

"Probably." I dropped the headphones back on their hook. "Where to now?"

"Dunno. Out." He waved vaguely northward. "This place closes in ten minutes."

I headed for the cash, carrying the eclectic little pile of CDs I'd accumulated. I wasn't sure if I was buying them for him or for me, but it didn't really matter. As the only one of us who owned a stereo of *any* quality, I'd end up with custody.

We left the store and walked north through the thinning ranks of late night pedestrians, still going nowhere in particular. I was starting to relax and get comfortable with drifting, until annoying memory reminded me that "going nowhere" as pretty much how Dad defined my career just before he said good-night. I knew he was wrong. I didn't know if he would ever believe it.

"Getting cold?" Vachon inquired, when I stuffed my hands in my pockets and blew out my breath in annoyance.

"Not really. It feels more like April tonight than January."

Something bothering you, then?"

I started to say "nothing", then shrugged. "Oh, I just keep flashing back to the argument I had with my father." Over a couple of leisurely blocks I gave him the *Reader's Digest* version of Dad's decision

to transfer me to corporate crime, its results, and my own decision to chase the paperwork all over town until I could get back to Nick, Captain Reese and the 96th Precinct.

"Let's just say Dad didn't take it well. He said my career is going nowhere. Actually, he said my life is going nowhere."

Vachon pondered this for a few steps, then asked, "You like what you're doing?"

"Sure, more than anything else I've done."

"Seems like a pretty obvious answer to me."

"Disagreeing with Dad isn't that easy."

"Even when he's wrong?" he asked, echoing my own thought of a few minutes earlier.

"I'll introduce you to Dad someday, Vachon, and then you'll understand." It was an empty threat, though once in a while I did amuse myself trying to picture it. Even Richard Vetter might lose his bluster if he found himself nose-to-nose with a pair of fangs. "Besides, how can I be so sure he's wrong? I'm twenty-five years old, and sometimes I feel like I haven't accomplished anything."

"Hey, could be worse. When I was your age, I'd been dead five years." He said it casually even though we were in the midst of a public street. But then, who really listens to what the people around you are saying?

"Don't say that. You're not..." I couldn't quite repeat it, and I don't think it had much to do with where we were. When he greeted the protest with silence and a level stare, I added, "Oh, all right, I don't know *what* you are."

"Sure you do. You just don't want to accept it." He stopped walking abruptly. "Come on then, let's go somewhere."

"Where?"

He pointed his finger at a narrow side street that disappeared between two of the neighboring buildings. "That way."

The street took us into a parking lot huddled in the shadow of the surrounding buildings. In its far corner, a couple were loading packages into the trunk of their car, but otherwise we were alone. Vachon confirmed that fact by turning in a circle, then with no warning he put one arm around my back, the other behind my knees and picked me up. I'm six feet tall and fairly athletic — being swept off my feet is not a common experience for me. I didn't have time to be surprised. In a fraction of a second, the mild winter night had turned into a rush of arctic air, the lights of the city were dropping away below me, and I was *terrified!*

"Vachon!" My arms closed convulsively around his neck, as though that would help if he decided to drop me.

He just grinned, patiently waiting through the few seconds it took my survival instincts to calm down and my sense of wonder to come back to life. And when I stopped being afraid, it was wonderful, all of it, the icy air, free flight or as close to it as a human would ever know. Little puffs of moonlit clouds floated above us and the city spread out far below, a multi-colored texturing of lights and blackness.

"Wow," I said quietly, not caring that this was scarcely a powerful or poetic summary of the experience. There are times when words become meaningless. I couldn't hear anything except the wind, but I felt his laughter through the contact of my side against his chest and saw it on his face. He wasn't mocking me; he was enjoying my enchantment.

We didn't stay aloft long, for which my heart was sorry and my rapidly chilling skin was glad. We reached a pinnacle of flight above the heart of the city, with the lights of the CN Tower far below, then he shot downward so fast that it was worse than hitting an air pocket on a plane. That less-than-pleasant sensation ended when his feet touched down on the roof of a downtown bank tower. He stood for a minute, holding me casually in his arms, then set me down beside him on the foot-wide parapet that circled the building.

"Thank you for flying Vampire Airways. We hope you enjoyed your flight... Did you enjoy your flight?" he inquired, when he didn't get an immediate answer.

"Oh, yes." I looked at the brightly lit world many stories below, and was glad of the arm that still

held me loosely around the waist. I'm not afraid of heights, but it took all my willpower not to retreat from the abyss at my feet to the safety of the flat roof behind us.

"Come on, the view's better on the other side."

Ignoring the straight — safe — route across the roof, he took my hand and started to stroll along the parapet. I made it about three steps before my feet froze.

Turning back, Vachon caught my chin and turned my gaze from the panorama below to his face. "Hey, trust me."

"How can I trust you? I can't even begin to understand you."

"That's why you like me," he told me merrily. "I surprise you. Your dad would hate me."

"That's not true."

"Really?" Those big brown eyes were all innocence again. "You think your dad would like me?"

"Oh, no, I'm *sure* Dad would hate you. I meant I don't just like you because you surprise me. Mind you..." I threw another glance at the ground, so far below that I didn't even want to think about it... "I suppose it helps."

"Want to see the view on the other side?"

"Can we go across the middle?"

He shrugged. "Sure, if you want."

That was my cue to face the parapet, just to prove I could, but I honestly didn't know if he wanted me to prove it to myself or him. I have never believed in taking foolish, unnecessary risks, but this wasn't truly a risk, was it? I might not understand him, but in spite of my own protest — dictated by common sense and good judgment — I did trust him. He wouldn't let me fall.

But I truly hate to be rescued, so I kept my balance along the narrow path, and made damn sure I didn't need to be.

Vachon was right — the view from the south side of the building was magnificent. Standing on a man-made cliff above the city, we watched the CN Tower, the lights of the harbor and the occasional flickers of brightness that marked boats scudding across the moonlit velvet of Lake Ontario. Finally, long before I wanted to leave, the sharp wind defeated me and I shivered within the ski sweater that had been more than adequate protection on the streets below.

"Time to go, I guess," he suggested, sensing the motion, though he was neither touching nor watching me.

"It must be useful, not caring about the temperature."

"Has its advantages." After a pause, he admitted, "Has a few disadvantages rolled into the package too, though."

"You'll have to tell me about them sometime."

"I know I will." His arms closed around me, then we were aloft again, moving too fast for eyes below to follow, heading toward the harbor. I was still trying to get oriented, to figure out where we were going, when we landed on the Spit. A long finger of man-made parkland that thrusts out into the lake to the east of the city, the Spit is a breakwater for the harbor and a nesting place for thousands of birds. I'd biked along it any number of times on sunny days, but like so much of the city, it was a new, strange place in the darkness.

For a while, we just strolled along the path that led out to the lighthouse, enjoying the night with only each other and an occasional hunting owl for company.

"You know, Vachon, this is turning into a bit of an odyssey. Maybe I should change my name to Ulysses and buy a boat. Send home postcards. That sort of thing."

"Are we having fun yet?"

"Yes, we're having fun. It's all very strange, but we're having fun."

"That's the whole point of life, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, it's *part* of the point, but there is more to it than that."

"Like what?"

"Oh, living up to your responsibilities. Making a difference. Accomplishing something you can be proud of... You're laughing at me."

"I was just remembering the second time we met, when I took you down to Screed's. You were tied to a chair, you thought I was going to kill you, and you still sat there and lectured me on responsibility."

"I wasn't thinking too clearly." That observation made him laugh again. "Oh, give me a break. Between you, the Inca, Screed and the rats, I was having a rough night."

We rounded a turn in the path, and reached a spot where the trees opened on a point of land that overlooked Centre Island and the city beyond. The temperature difference between the warm air and icy lake water had stirred up patches of ground fog, lacy tendrils that floated eerily among the trees and across the water.

"It's beautiful. I've never been out here at night."

"The big, locked fence back there probably has something to do with it. You're such a law-abiding sort."

"Or I was until I met you, hm?"

I'd never been any good at taking the initiative in anything. I'd never needed to learn. My whole life had been handed to me on a platter, sliced up into neat little bite-sized chunks, and I'd accepted that not so much as desirable as inevitable. But in the past few months my life had changed, and I was struggling to change with it. Dad had indulged me with an assignment to homicide, planning to leave me there for a few months, protected by the umbrella of his influence, then move me onward along the path he'd mapped out for me. Instead, he'd handed me a purpose and a job I loved, and when he tried to shift me onward to a safe, high-profile assignment, I astounded both of us by defying him.

How much harder could this be?

This time I was the one who reached out, letting my gloved fingers slide across Vachon's long mane. It wasn't that cold tonight; I stripped off the glove and did it again, tangling my fingers in the thick, black silk, stroking the cords of muscle that ran down the back of his neck.

Vachon's face had frozen somewhere between neutral and wary. Last autumn I'd once tried to talk to him about the future of what was forming between us, and he'd given me back nothing. He wasn't the first man I'd met with a serious allergy to the term "relationship", and at the time I'd been annoyed, impatient and naive enough to take his reaction at face value. By now I knew better than to take anything Vachon said or did at face value.

"Tracy..."

"Give it time?" I queried. "How much time?"

"There are a lot of things you don't understand."

"So explain them to me. I didn't start this. When have I ever wandered around *your* place half dressed?"

He didn't move a muscle when I kissed him lightly, just on the corner of his mouth. It was hardly the time or place for grand seduction, but that wasn't what I meant it to be. It was a question.

*We've come this far. We both know we're falling in love. Where do we go from here?*

Vachon's hands settled lightly on my waist, neither pulling me closer nor pushing me away.

"Not a good idea, Tracy," he told me with quiet sadness. "Not unless you like the night shift so much you want it permanently."

"That's more or less what I thought."

Surprise overrode the guarded emptiness in his eyes, and it was my turn to laugh at him.

"Oh, come on, I've known you six months. I've seen what strong emotions do to you." Albeit not very often, because he was always so very careful with me, keeping his distance even when he was close.

"Then why do it?" he demanded, the tone impatient and a little angry. His hands dropped from my waist, and he turned and walked out to the edge of the water.

"Because tonight is my night for breaking bad habits. Because it's the first time I've found the nerve to talk about it." From where I stood, he was a black silhouette against the cityscape, hands in his jacket pockets, his hair catching the wind. "And we do need to talk about it, Javier. Otherwise we'll just drift along forever. I've been drifting most of my life, always taking what was given to me, never making my own decisions. Never reaching for what I want. I'm trying to learn some alternatives."

"Maybe you'd better settle for figuring out how to talk back to your father. It's safer."

"Stop me if you've heard this one before: If I'd wanted safe, I would've become a librarian. I carry a gun and chase murderers for a living, Javier. I've just gone for a walk on the roof of an eighty-story building with a vampire. I can face the truth, whatever it is."

"How do you know I can face telling it to you?" He didn't look at me as I moved out to stand beside him, with the icy water lapping at my feet.

"Sure you can. It's been a good year for both of us. I looked my father straight in the eye and said, 'No, sir'. You stopped running. Maybe we make each other stronger."

He sighed. I couldn't hear the sound, but I saw it in the movement of his chest. "You've been reading too many romance novels, Trace. Things don't work out like that in the real world."

"The real world doesn't have vampires. If I can believe in them, I can believe in anything."

Vachon finally turned to face me, studying me for a long moment with eyes that saw as well in the darkness as I could see at midday, then he slid his arms around me and kissed me — *really* kissed me, with an intense, desperate, barely controlled passion that took my breath away. My arms closed around his back, I brushed his tongue with mine as he explored my mouth, then the embrace was gone, and he was standing a dozen steps away from me, his breathing uneven, his dark eyes paled to bright, deadly golden.

"It's like I told you, Trace." Even his voice was different when he was like that, roughened by a hint of feline growl. "Bad idea."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, we do need to talk."

Vachon stared at me as if I were insane, while his eyes darkened back to their normal, human camouflage.

"You really aren't afraid of me, are you?"

"Never have been, I guess... We've got a few hours until sunrise. Let's go back to my place."

"Tomorrow night," he said, with a sharp shake of his head. "I have some thinking to do first."

"Tonight," I countered instantly. "By tomorrow, you'll have thought up a hundred excuses, and I'll have lost my nerve."

"You're a very stubborn woman, you know that, Tracy Vetter?"

"Believe me, I come by it honestly." I closed the small gap between us and looked at him expectantly. "What? You want me to stick out my thumb?"

It took him a moment, but eventually he laughed. Then he swept me up in his arms, and for the third time that night, I saw the city from above. It had never looked more beautiful.

He touched down again beside the Triumph, which had escaped the notice of Traffic division or anyone else. I reached for the helmet I'd worn on the way over, then noticed the lights of an all-night convenience store.

"Hang on, I need to run in there and grab some milk."

"Milk?"

"You know, white stuff, goes on your breakfast cereal. No, you probably don't know, do you? Never mind, I'll just be a minute."

He shook his head in disbelief, which I suppose was justified. We'd been out flying without a plane, we were going home to discuss the limits of our peculiar future, and I was stopping off at the 7-11. Can't help it, I grew up practical. Why should falling in love with a vampire change that? Short of radically changing my diet, of course, but we had a long way to go yet before I looked too closely at *that* possibility.

Vachon followed me into the shop, and wandered around curiously while I found what I needed and took it to the cash register. Coming up behind me, he rested his chin on my shoulder and reached past me to pull a postcard from the rack by the counter. The face of the card was solid black with the words "Toronto by Night" printed on the corner. He thought about it for a moment, then snorted — rather loudly — in my ear.

"Don't tell me you've never seen that joke before? I think you can get them everywhere in the world, with just the name of the city changed."

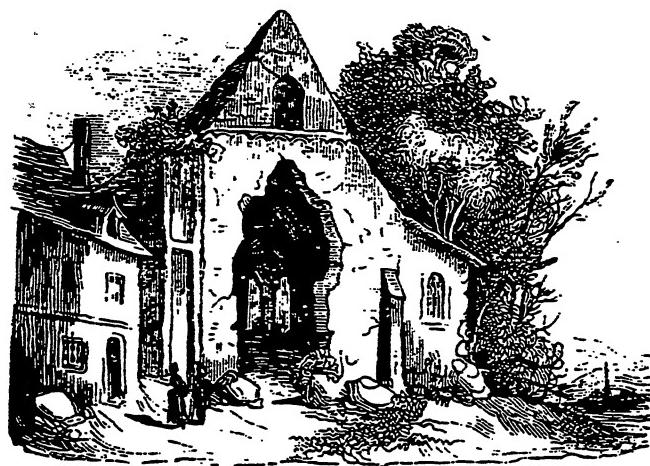
"Here—" He stuffed it into my hand. "Send it to your dad. Souvenir of the odyssey." I returned the postcard to its place on the rack. "My dad has no sense of humor whatsoever—" "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"—and even if he did, there are some things I prefer not to call his attention to." Even my nice, normal relationships with *ordinary* men had always fallen into that category.

"That means Sunday dinner is out, huh?"

"Yup." I paid for my quart of milk, and picked up the bag, trying to remember if his bike had saddlebags. If so, they'd probably never before held groceries. "I can say most definitely that Sunday dinner is right out."

- The End -



*MIAMI VICE was often referred to as "MTV Cops" because of its flashy style and effective use of music. It aired on NBC-TV from 1984-89. The basic story line dealt with veteran vice cop Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) and the drug scene in Miami. Along with fighting the Drug War and corruption, Sonny divorced his first wife, Caroline (Belinda Montgomery)(first season), suffered through several doomed romances, and finally (fourth season) married Caitlin Davies (Sheena Easton), an internationally acclaimed rock star who was killed by Frank Hackman (Guy Boyd); Sonny had helped release Hackman from prison under the mistaken belief that Hackman was innocent of the crime for which he had been convicted--killing Crockett's partner. Stress and guilt blunted Crockett's edge and he was injured in a boat explosion (end of fourth season), suffering amnesia. During the four-episode bout with amnesia, Crockett took on the coldness of his undercover persona, Sonny Burnett, and was responsible for several deaths; he also took over a drug empire. When he regained his memory he was ordered to see psychiatrists and allowed back on the job (standard procedure for Miami, where it's hard to find a cop who hasn't got an arrest record). At the end of the fifth season, Crockett and his partner, Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas), survived a suicide mission to Costa Morada in pursuit of General Borbon (Ian McShane), a CIA-backed drug dealer. In the course of the investigation, Crockett and Tubbs discovered that corruption in the police department included Captain Hightower. When both Hightower and Borbon were killed, Crockett and Tubbs had two choices: be killed by Agent Baker and his men, or throw down their badges and leave Miami. They chose the latter, since NBC was selling the show into syndication (USA network) and didn't want to kill off its main characters.*

## **Blood Brothers**

*by*

*JJ Jones*

"You're cutting it kind of close, aren't you?" Rico Tubbs glanced out the window at the CenTrust building, the paneled windows starting to show a light other than the brilliant blue that had sent its beacon to the clouds hovering over Miami last night.

"Better roll up the windows. Never can be too careful."

A raspy voice grated in the confines of the car. "I'm fine, Rico, as long as I'm inside."

Tubbs covered his mouth to muffle the nervous laughter. His partner was in no mood for levity, hadn't been on their all night stake-out. "I know. I..."

Sonny Crockett blew out a gust of air. "You try too hard sometimes."

"This vampire business is new to me, too. I don't mean to step on your toes."

The look he was treated to made him back off, mentally and physically. He slid over to hug the door, his eyes averted from what he had seen in Crockett's eyes. Anger...and underneath, contempt. Was Sonny aware of how demoralizing this look, this attitude, could be? Rico got the impression right then, not only did he know, but he used it to distance himself from his partner, from anyone human.

"You ever hear from that Knight guy?"

His attempt to reach Sonny fell flat. The green eyes impaled him, the lips thinning, a tic pulsing in the jaw. Familiar warning signals he decided he'd better heed this time.

He put up his hands in a placating gesture. "Okay, okay."

The look faded. Sonny shook his head, wearily passing his left hand over his eyes. "Sorry, man."

Rico bit his lip. "Sorry, human," he'd meant.

Tubbs retreated into his own thoughts, keeping an eye peeled on the rearview mirror where the sun, when it burned through the cloud cover, would appear. It had been almost a year since his partner had seen a sunrise. He risked a glance at Sonny.

When had it started to go sour? They'd been reinstated as Vice detectives, switching to the night shift. It had been left up to Lieutenant Castillo to provide a believable explanation for everything, and he'd done it. If the ladies or Switek had any questions, they'd never asked them after all this time.

"Hurry, Crockett," he urged, seeing the rim of the blood-red sun leer in the windows of the buildings in the Miami skyline.

When the speed of the car did not increase, he leaned over and hit the power switch that raised all the windows — illegally tinted — sealing them inside a sweltering tin can.

"Want to hit the a.c.?"

Crockett nodded indifferently. He was not affected by changes in temperature.

Rico assessed his partner. No discernible differences. Sonny had a reflection and a decent tan, thanks to being able to use a sun lamp a little every day, and he had let his hair grow until it looked like a rock star's. The blond mane was stuck through the back of a Marlins baseball cap. Crockett still dressed the same as always: pastels, no socks, deck shoes, extremely dark RayBan sunglasses. He gave every appearance of being normal, yet something had changed, perhaps even died when he had been brought over against his will. The camaraderie they'd always shared seemed a little forced these days. Tubbs felt Crockett worried how he handled the fact he was a vampire, able to fly — oh, man, had that

spooked him when he first saw Crockett airborne — having to exist on bovine brew. At least it wasn't like the movies and Sonny could exist on cow's blood and not have to attack humans. If he looked at it a certain way, it was like his partner had an illness and the blood was the medication.

Rico prided himself on how well he had adjusted to this crazy life. Nights, tooling around in Crockett's Caddy — no sports car had a big enough trunk capacity in case of an emergency — sleeping days, having a partner that drank blood. He'd come to terms with all that. What he found difficult was Crockett shutting him out, never confiding in him. He knew something was bothering his partner, eating him up inside, but Sonny, no matter how hard he pushed, would not open up.

They arrived in the marina too damn late as far as Rico was concerned. He hustled Sonny inside the renovated **St. Vitus Dance**. Another thing Sonny had been adamant about when Castillo had offered him one of the "safe" houses. No way was he going to give up living on his beloved boat. So, he'd agreed to a compromise. Now the yacht's portholes had shutters he could roll down, to shut out every last drop of sunshine, and a computer whiz Lester had found had wired the hatch door with a security lock containing a code only Crockett knew, so no one could disturb him during the day.

Since there was no Elvis, the ten-foot watch-gator, he had a mastiff he'd rescued from the Humane Society that was his own version of a "hound from hell". Lurch was an ugly brute. Rico had seen small children burst into tears at just the sight of him. Good thing he was so ugly and brayed like a pregnant mule whenever anyone took one step on board, because it was all a joke. The dog was at heart a pussycat, a case of the bark being worse than the bite.

Rico recoiled as he always did when the dog greeted his owner by joyfully toppling him to the floor, his slobbering tongue busy at work on Sonny's face.

"Down, dammit!"

Not even Sonny could quell the monster's delight. Rico tried to be helpful, grabbing the collar and pulling, to no avail. The dog weighed a ton. Snapping his fingers, Tubbs went to the galley and turned on the electric can opener.

"Food, Lurch!" he called. "Chow chow chow."

He lured the dog topside with a bag of Kibbles 'n Bits and chained him to the mast. Sonny had already secured the **St. Vitus** and didn't try to cover a huge yawn when Rico returned. It was Rico's turn, and the two detectives shared a grin when they stopped the yawning festival.

"I'm beat."

Tubbs nodded. "Me, too." When Sonny shucked his jacket, he headed for the stairs. "Guess that's my cue to blow this floating popstand. See you tonight."

Sonny waved a hand, but didn't look up.

Rico patted Lurch, telling him to watch over his master, and headed for his car in the marina parking lot, the spot reserved for Sonny T. Burnett.

His department-issued La Baron convertible gleamed in the sunlight. A search through his pockets did not turn up his keys. He backtracked in his mind and remembered leaving them on the desk in the hold when he'd come at dusk, since they'd taken Sonny's car. Great.

Lurch began barking urgently. God, that dog could wake the dead. He was immediately sorry he'd had that thought, but it was true. The dog kept barking, and something in the tone pulled Rico back to the boat.

He started to run, not knowing why he felt such urgency, but knowing somehow his partner was in trouble. As he drew nearer, Lurch began to howl, an eerie wail that sent an ice cube of apprehension sliding down his spine.

He saw the dog first, throwing itself against the chain over and over, almost in a frenzy, whining, clawing at the deck, breath rattling as the collar choked it. Then he saw Crockett...on deck when he should have been inside. Wildly he glanced up. The sun was too high, too intense.

"Sonny!" he screamed with everything he had left, legs and arms pumping as he dashed down the pier.

Crockett stood, clad only in old black shorts, hands clenched at his sides, head back, eyes blazing with agony. Smoke began to rise from his body, the hairs on his arms and legs singeing. He did not speak,

just stood there and let it happen.

Rico tackled him, covering him with his body. Crockett fought his rescuer, crazed, fangs bared, fists flailing, but Tubbs' fury enabled him to overcome all resistance. He dragged him to the hatch, bare ankles thumping each step as he writhed in Rico's grasp. Tubbs allowed him to lie on the floor while he went back up and closed the hatch, bolting it, setting the lock.

Crockett rubbed his arms and started to get up, but was given a vehement push. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" Rico shouted, making him wince. He continued before Sonny could open his mouth. "No. I don't want to hear it. I *saw*. You were just going to stand there and let it happen, let the sun turn you into a clump of cinders." He shook a finger in his face. "No good-bye, no nothing. It's not as if you owed me anything, you ungrateful sonavabitch! Not that you give a damn about anything these days, excuse me, these nights. Not that it matters that I gave up my regular life to be here for you."

"I'm...sorry..."

"You sure are!" He wasn't going to allow Crockett to con him this time. "Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me I didn't see you trying to commit suicide. Go ahead, Sonny. Say the magic words I'm okay."

"Rico, I..."

Tubbs found the first aid kit and threw it at him. "Here, there should be something for burns in there."

"It isn't what you thought."

"Don't bullshit me, Crockett. I know what I saw." The fire in the green-gold eyes wavered. "I also know you don't give a damn about anything anymore, not even me, or you would've never tried to take such a coward's way out."

"I wasn't trying to kill myself."

"Look at your arms and legs. They look like you spent a whole day at the beach."

Crockett stood, swaying, trembling. "I honestly don't remember going out there."

It wasn't at all what Rico expected to hear and he was puzzled. "You expect me to believe that? If I hadn't come when I did, you would've been a french fry."

Sonny stared at the inflamed skin on his arms. The golden hairs had been burned away, as had the top layer of his epidermis. He'd almost killed himself. His eyes, when he glanced at Rico, told the truth in their bewilderment. He didn't remember.

"I'm staying here today." Rico didn't ask if it was all right. "I'm also calling Castillo."

The blistered skin needed relief, although Sonny knew it would heal quickly by itself. He applied ointment anyway, knowing what would work faster: go into the shower and take a blood-bath, but he didn't want to gross out his partner, and his dependency on blood bothered him too much, anyway. He had, in the last two months, tried to go cold turkey, forgetting what he'd been told by Inez, the vampire who turned him, and then by Nick Knight: "Your body will overrule your mind".

"Lieutenant, it's Tubbs. Something's happening with Sonny. I think it's time to contact a specialist."

Castillo knew he wasn't referring to a psychiatrist. "I'll see to it. How serious?"

"Serious as a heart attack," Rico told him and broke the connection.

Sonny seemed okay now, a little embarrassed, bewildered, hurting, but mentally sound. "God, my head hurts."

For him to complain was unusual and Rico's worry deepened. "Lie down." Rico's voice was gentle, weary.

Sonny crawled onto the bed. "Take the bunk," he said, wincing as raw skin rubbed the sheets when he drew the cover up.

An air conditioner had been added and Tubbs turned it on low, then turned in for the day. "I'll wake up if you so much as make one move for the door," he warned, yawning.

Sonny's eyes closed, his body still. He was too tired to stay awake any longer and let sleep claim him.

The phone rang that evening a little after the sun had gone down. Crockett, bleary-eyed, answered. "Yeah."

"Is this line safe?" It was a voice he knew he should recognize. "Knight?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, it's safe. What the hell?"

"I might ask you the same thing, Sonny. I'm on my way to Miami. Should arrive tomorrow evening."

Sonny glanced at Rico's guilty yet defiant expression. "See you then."

The answer was a dry chuckle, then a click.

"That was Nick Knight, but then, you know that, don't you?"

Rico ignored the sarcasm, going to the galley, opening the tiny 'fridge. "You're pretty low on juice."

He held out a wine bottle, only half full. Sonny looked at it with revulsion, knocking it aside when Rico persisted.

"I don't want it."

"It's been three days without, Crockett." At his partner's mutinous glare, Tubbs' voice rose. "When are you going to get it through your head I don't care you have to drink this stuff? It doesn't sicken me, it..."

"It sickens *me!*" Sonny cut him off sharply.

"If you don't want to do it in front of me, I understand. I'll wait for you on deck." He put the bottle down.

The blond head snapped around and glared, his eyes narrow and furious. It was lost on Rico, whose back was to him as he climbed the rungs to the hatch.

The bottle beckoned. Had it really been so long? What was he trying to prove? That he could beat it? Well, he couldn't and the knowledge rubbed his spirit raw, galled him as nothing else. Being a cop for over twenty years, he'd seen all forms of addictions, and now he was hooked.

He throttled the neck of the bottle, glaring at it, then with an exasperated sigh of resignation, tilted it, and allowed the cow's blood to flow into his mouth. He grimaced, swallowing hastily until the edge was off his hunger, then put the remainder in the refrigerator.

Using a napkin, he dabbed a trickle from the corner of his mouth. Brushing his teeth and using Listerine followed, then he showered, combed his hair, and shaved haphazardly. He dressed, pulling out the first pair of slacks in the closet, the first t-shirt in the chest-of-drawers. Before putting on a jacket that matched the pants, he strapped on his gun and slipped his badge into his pocket.

Rico was gazing forlornly at the left-over glow from the sunset. He started when Crockett tapped him on the shoulder.

"You look a little rough, partner. We better drop by your place so you can shower and change clothes."

They took the Caddy to Rico's apartment in Coconut Grove. Sonny waited outside and was joined shortly by a more dapper partner.

"Better?"

Sonny nodded, grinning. "Much."

Rico took his seat. "You okay?"

With a short nod, then, as though he thought better of it, Sonny sighed. "I'm fine, Tubbs. I ate and I feel better."

"What's on the agenda tonight?"

"Thought I'd drop by and see what Castillo has for us, since this stakeout is going nowhere."

OCB at night was a different place, the atmosphere somber, quiet. No typewriters, no computers, no telephones, no busy staff filling the squadroom with noise and activity. Silence.

They came through the swinging doors, crossing the room to find Martin Castillo in his office. He was on the phone and held up a hand for quiet, so they sat on the black leather sofa, waiting.

Martin hung up. His dark eyes searched Sonny's face for a moment, but he wasn't one to observe the social amenities. He dealt with Crockett's dilemma as he did everything else: efficiently, logically.

"I'm pulling you off the Mendez stakeout."

That was fine with Sonny. "Good, it's a waste of man power."

Castillo shook his head. "No. Tubbs will continue with Switek as backup. I want you to take some

time off."

Crockett straightened and looked at his superior almost expressionlessly. "You want my resignation, Marty, just ask."

At a look from Castillo, Tubbs excused himself.

"You have to deal with this."

"So I'm suspended."

Martin pinched the bridge of his nose. "No. Take a leave of absence. You have days coming."

Crockett snorted, standing. "Don't you mean nights?"

He wouldn't be baited. "I need you whole."

"Don't do this to me, Marty." He stressed each word, his voice pitched low, hypnotic.

There was a slight quirk at the corner of Martin's mouth and a twinkle in his eye. "Knight can help if you'll let him."

"What choice do I have?" His voice rasped like a file, grating on the nerves — on an ordinary man it would have been intimidating.

One thing Sonny hated was having his personal space invaded, a weapon he used on others. Martin knew this when he stood, walked around the desk, and came within centimeters of the detective's body. Brown eyes on green.

"You're off the street until you deal with this."

The response was a slamming door.

He was almost to the elevator, when Rico seized his elbow.

"Whoa! You want to tell me what gives?"

Sonny swung around, and Rico took an involuntary step back. He seemed to be on the narrow edge of emotional collapse, holding himself in check with the greatest effort. "Get the hell away from me, Tubbs."

Rico's eyes widened. As he watched, the green eyes dulled, the nostrils flared wide and Sonny's features blurred, then reformed into a predatory mask.

"I mean it, Rico. I can't be trusted."

Tubbs touched his shoulder and Crockett flinched away. "I just want you to know, I'm here for you. I'm not going to leave, and nothing you can do will drive me away."

Sonny sagged against the wall. He had a ghastly pallor, then went rigid as dry sticks, his eyes staring at Rico with glassy enormity, his bloodless lips sucked in.

"Sonny, are you okay? You sick?"

Before he could control them, Crockett felt his fangs slide out, his eyes change to feral ferocity. "I'm hungry."

It was not a human voice. Rico backed down the hall, fighting the fear rising in his gorge, his hackles standing on end.

A heart-stopping second later, Crockett spoke again, but this time in a voice that belonged to a scared young child. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's happening to me."

The contrast came close to breaking Tubbs' heart. He wanted to pat Sonny on the back, but physical contact didn't seem wise. "Knight will help you, Sonny."

But Sonny had slipped away. The elevator hummed, depositing its cargo in the lobby. Only then did Rico wipe sweat from his face and realize he was trembling violently.

Stepping out of the elevator, Sonny kicked a waste can the length of the room, hands jammed in his pockets. His damned humble, trusting, forgiving partner — no, more than that, friend. He wanted to hit him, wanted to do some ugly thing that would destroy that mute earnestness, that anxiety to be there for him. Because only then could Tubbs be safe. God, he'd come so close to taking him right there.

Driving in his state of mind was out of the question, so he flew. It was the one thing he enjoyed about being a vampire, the freedom, the release, the isolation.

He wasn't ready to go home. No steady girl. At one time he would have gone to a bar and drunk himself into a stupor, but even Jack Daniels, his old pal, couldn't quench this thirst.

Blood lust. Go home, Crockett. Go home and polish off a couple of bottles of the ol' cow brewski.

He knew he had more — he kept extra bottles in a cooler.

Catching an air current, he turned, seeing the Miami skyline lit in all its glory, the Centrust white tonight, a huge crystal lighting the clouds above. Green streaks slashed the darkness, coming from Bayside. Another laser show for the tourists.

Pain knifed through his gut and he groaned. He'd waited too long. He needed to feed. Faltering in his flight, he dove for the ground, where a hundred red rivers flowed, hearing the heartbeats of the humans in their vehicles on the MacArthur Causeway.

He swooped back up, then made a bee-line for the Miami marina, barely controlling the urge to attack the first human he sensed at the crowded shopping complex. The *St. Vitus Dance* never looked so good. Not even taking time to shed his jacket, he went to the galley, poured a large mugfull from the bottle, popped it in the microwave for a few seconds, then slugged the blood down as fast as he could swallow. At least warm was better than cold, although what he craved was hot, fresh, sweet-salty blood gushing from a human throat.

But it seemed to work and he could relax. The hunger was appeased. He took off his jacket and gun, flopped on the bunk, and thought, "Now what?"

No book on his shelf appealed to him, and vacuous sitcoms were on every channel on tv. For a moment he considered going fishing, then remembered he had no bait.

Pacing the narrow confines of the cabin, Sonny ran his hands through his hair, his fingers grazing the scalp. What the hell was he supposed to do?

The cellular phone lay on the nightstand. Picking it up, he pulled out the antenna and dialed a number he hadn't used in so long, for a moment, his fingers paused before entering the last four digits.

"Hello?"

Caroline's voice. His mouth opened but no words came out.

"Hello? Is anybody there?" There was a beat, then she said softly, alertly, "Sonny?"

His ex-wife always had been psychic when it came to him. "Hi, it's me. Is...Billy there?"

"No, I'm sorry. He's spending the night at a friend's house." She was just as uncomfortable as he, unable to think of anything to say. Seven years of marriage and they couldn't talk to each other.

"Sonny, you still there?"

"Yeah, guess I missed him. I'm good at that."

Something in his voice must have given him away. "Are you all right? Is the job going okay?"

"I'm okay." He knew if Rico had been there, something would have been said when he used his famous last words. "Really, I — have a few days coming and I thought..."

What did he think? That he could call after not seeing Billy going on three years and make up by inviting him to spend quality time with his biological father? And with what was going on with him, did he dare risk it? What if the blood-lust came on him and he fed on his son? No, this was a bad idea.

"Sonny? I...could call him and tell him to call you."

That was a kind offer. Sometimes he was sure Caroline wished he would just let her husband Bob adopt Billy and stay out of his life completely. Well, isn't that what he did anyway — only devoting a token day or so a year to his son?

"Sonny?" Compassion he didn't deserve.

"No, that's okay. I'll try again...some time."

Gently he broke the connection and tossed the phone onto the bed. Air. He needed some air; suddenly the cabin was too claustrophobic.

Lurch tried to climb into his lap when he came above and sat on the bait storage box, gazing at people shopping and having a good time. Here he was with the Hound of the Baskervilles, feeling sorry for himself.

Maybe he'd walk over, check out the action. He hadn't picked up a woman in a while. Some companionship, even for one evening, would be nice. Sex didn't have to enter into it, just someone to have dinner...

"Dammit!"

Lurch whimpered and sank to his belly as Sonny kicked an empty bait bucket, sending it skittering

across the teakwood deck. "That's what I miss," he told the dog. "Eating. Seafood. God, I used to love to have friends over and boil a lobster...dip it in butter...Pizza...smothered in garlic and extra cheese and pepperoni and black olives.. His mouth was watering. "Or a hot dog! With the works."

Lurch barked, cocking his head. The phone was ringing.

Glad of anything to relieve the boredom, Crockett raced to answer. His "Burnett" was rather breathless.

"Just thought I'd call and let you know you're not missing out on anything."

"I am if you and Switek pig out on junk food. I swear, Rico, I miss that the most."

"Remember who you're talking to. Junk food does not go into this body."

His fine-tuned hearing could discern noises in the background, sounds he knew ordinary ears could not hear. There was another voice but he couldn't make out the words.

"Rico, be quiet for a minute, will you?"

Tubbs subsided, mystified.

There it was again, faint, a voice he recognized: not Tubbs, not Switek. But close by... He closed his eyes and honed in on it.

"Stupid cops, they sit there in the same spot for a whole week and they think they're safe."

He dropped the phone. He didn't think, just reacted. The marina was a memory as he flew to the stakeout spot, straining every muscle. Flying was faster than any mode of transportation. If anybody looked up, they'd think they either saw a UFO or blame the Batman craze.

His anxiety increased when he was a block away and heard the voice again. It belonged to a man he knew only as Cortez, a stone-cold killer, who now intended to add two cops to his resume.

Cortez was on the roof of one of the art deco hotels on Collins Avenue, prone, holding a sniper's rifle, attaching a night scope. He was alone. He had a bad habit of talking to himself.

Sonny landed behind him, making only the slightest sound. It was enough to cause Cortez to whirl, breaking out his handgun.

"Hold it right there," the gunman called out. He paused, squinting in the darkness. "Burnett, that you? What the hell you doing here?"

"Cortez, baby," Sonny chided, sliding easily into his Burnett cover banter. "What's the job this time?"

Seeing nothing to warrant firing and giving himself away to his intended targets, he gestured with the gun. "I don't know how you got up here without me hearing you..."

Sonny ignored the weapon and peered over the wall, down to the alley where Rico and Switek sat like sitting ducks under a streetlight in Swi's convertible. He winced. How many times had he and Rico sat in the Daytona, so vulnerable to a sniper's bullets? Behind him he heard the double click that meant Cortez had thumbed the gun hammer back.

"Hold it, pal. All that's gonna do is tick me off."

"Look, Burnett, under ordinary circumstances I'd let you skulk back under the rock you crawled out from, but these ain't ordinary circumstances. We've done business in the past, and I ain't got nothing personally against you, but I'm here to do a job, and I don't want any witnesses."

Sonny turned, showing his teeth in a humorless grin. "Well, since you're going to whack me anyway, grant me one last favor."

Cortez's mean rat's eyes narrowed. "Ya want a last smoke?"

"No, I want to know who you're working for: who has the cajones to hire a hit on two cops?"

He nodded. "Since we was on the same side, sure, why not? You ain't gonna be around to blab his name."

The gun was aimed at Sonny's heart. He instinctively flinched. Being shot wouldn't kill him, but it would ruin a perfectly good jacket.

"Who?" he prodded, raising his hands so Cortez would feel more at ease.

"He's out of your league."

Suddenly, a sound pounded Sonny's ears, obliterating all others. He couldn't hear Cortez, just the beating of the gunman's heart, and the rush of blood through his veins. After three days' abstinence, the

little blood he'd had wasn't enough. He'd screwed up and this low-life was going to pay the ultimate price.

The fangs came out and his lips writhed back, allowing the man to see, savoring his terror, feeding on it as he would devour every last drop of his blood.

Helpless mortal...thinking a gun would save him. Sonny advanced, slapping it away with a speed that caused his prey to blink.

Cortez backed away, crossing himself, a mixture of fear, loathing and disbelief crawling like insects on his face.

"Who hired you?" Sonny hissed.

The man darted for the roof door, but didn't make it. Sonny caught him by his slimy ponytail. He screamed, flailing, incoherent as Crockett bent him back as if they danced and he was dipping him.

Cortez's unwashed neck glistened in the sparse light. His struggles were ineffectual, then stopped, when he saw death in the green eyes over him. "Please, no..."

"Tell me the name." Sonny put his fangs to Cortez's throat, pricking him.

The man's eyes changed from fear to a wanton abandonment. "Frederico Hernandez," he whispered, ripping at his collar to bare his throat.

Sonny bit, watching the body spasm, then drank. He listened to the heartbeat slow to a snail's pace. The hot blood flowed over his tongue, down his throat, at first gushing, then slowing to a trickle until Cortez was nothing but an empty husk that he lowered to the roof.

The discarded gun glittered in the neon glow from the hotel's sign. Sonny picked it up and walked to the dead man. Grabbing a handful of hair, hauling Cortez into a sitting position, he jammed the muzzle against the back of the dead man's neck and pulled the trigger. The body jerked, slamming to the pavement.

He squatted, clinically examining the body. The exit wound had left a gaping hole in the throat; there was no sign of the fang marks.

The gun, still warm to the touch, went in his jacket pocket. He studied the murder scene with cop's eyes: sniper's rifle on the ledge; Cortez, a known gunman, also known to work for dealers if the price was right; one shot to the back of the head. Conclusion: a drug-related incident.

His temples beat like tympani drums as reason tried to assert itself. What was wrong with this picture? No blood in the body.

So, a riddle for the M.E. and Homicide. After an autopsy they'd know the victim had been dead before he was shot. No matter. They'd never figure out the truth, and he was safe.

His head was too full of fragments, like a kaleidoscope, making bright patterns of nonsense. Looking down at the corpse, he knew he should be feeling something. He'd committed cold-blooded murder, after all.

He listened. No sirens. The shot had been muffled by flesh and bone as it tore through Cortez, not even as loud as a backfire. He was safe.

The trip home was almost instantaneous. He grinned, and something deep inside screamed he had nothing to smile about, but the thought of light speed for vampires was funny. Euphoria wrapped him in a cloud, cushioning him from reality.

Power and vitality surged through him, his whole body suffused with it; even his hair crackled with energy. He felt young, alive. As he landed in the parking lot, he threw back his head and laughed, unable to stop himself.

Why should he stop? His stride as he walked down the pier to the *St. Vitus Dance* was cocky. Lurch bounded towards him when he boarded the yacht, then stopped, tail between his legs, sinking to his belly, whining.

"What's the matter, boy?"

The dog slunk away. What the hell was the matter with him?

The alarm clock on the nightstand told him it was only 9:00. Too damn early — too much left of the night.

He went to the head and stared, entranced, at his reflection. Now he knew what was happening. He was high, just like the time a dealer had flung cocaine into his face on a case he and Trudy had worked

on. The fine powder had entered his bloodstream within seconds and he'd had much the same reaction.

Lifting his wrist, he studied the large veins. Cortez's blood engorged them, distending them. Leaning closer to the mirror, he saw the whites of his eyes were pink, tiny capillaries spider-webbing the surface. He blinked, squeezing moisture from the corner of the right eye. A red tear tracked down his cheek. Fascinated, he watched it, and the voice of reason screamed again, begging him to listen.

As the sun cleared the clouds over the ocean, Sonny crawled into bed and lapsed into unconsciousness. Inez, the vampire who had turned him; different cases before and after; faces of women; Billy; monsters with fangs and glowing eyes, all crawled through his head. Every once in a while he felt the pull of the scene on the roof: he'd see the ledge, the two cops waiting to be picked off, a slice of Cortez's face. Each time he fought it down and stepped into a new dream fragment.

At one o'clock, Rico called. He didn't answer the phone, but listened as the voice came through the answering machine.

"This is Rico. Call me when you get up. I want to fill you in on what happened tonight."

A break in the case, he thought, unable to get up.

The bed was like a drug. He didn't want it, but he fell back on the sheets and in a minute was gone again. At two o'clock, suddenly touched with fear, he sat up, sweating, staring at the clock.

What? Nothing. Then the sound of teeth tearing flesh and a muffled pop. Sonny clapped a hand over his heart and let his head fall forward on his chest.

"Stop," he said to himself. He could feel the sweat literally erupt on his forehead. He didn't even know what it was he wanted to stop.

"Sonny?" It was Rico.

"Yeah." He looked down at the bed. He could see the outline of where his body had been from the sweat stains. The dreams had stayed with him until he woke, a little after six in the evening. A moment later, the phone rang.

"Just get up?"

"Yeah." A hot shower and liberal dose of Listerine was what he wanted.

Rico chuckled. "I don't know about you, Crockett. You weren't a morning person. You don't seem to be much of an evening person either."

God, what a taste — his tongue felt coated with something vile. Damn cow's blood.

"...Anyway it's a mystery. They're sitting on something, keeping a tight lid on it, so we figure it's more than just your average, everyday hit."

Crockett frowned. He'd been so wrapped up in his discomfort, he hadn't heard. "Who was hit?"

An exasperated sigh blew into his ear. "Cortez. Two would-be lovers went up to the roof of The Webster Hotel last night and found more than they bargained for."

"What was he doing there?"

"They found a sniper's rifle on the ledge..."

A subliminal picture suddenly forced its way to the surface: Cortez, his face writhing in terror, backing away.

"...Lucky for us. From his location, the position of the rifle, Stan and I were his intended targets. Sonny, you listening?"

"Yeah, I...I'm glad you're okay."

"You okay? Knight there yet?" Rico sounded grumpy.

Sonny tried to pull himself together. "I'm fine, and, no, he's not here. It's too soon. Did Castillo pull you off surveillance? If Cortez was there to whack you, then somebody must have made you. If your cover's blown, maybe you should get off the case."

"Castillo's sentiments exactly. Watching the Webster wasn't panning out anyway. We're on our way over to squeeze Moreno."

Sonny pictured Izzy Moreno: thin, hyper, mustache gracing his upper lip, furtive eyes, dressed in some godawful concoction, and always running some scam. The Cuban refugee had been their main snitch for more years than he cared to count, and he had developed a liking for the little sleaze ball. Izzy was a bust as a criminal, but an invaluable resource to OCB. He had a set of phones in his place, where he

could make calls that would provide him with information about anything major going down on the street. He played ball with the cops, and that's why he was still a free man.

"Joo got it, mang." He heard Rico chuckle at his Spanglish imitation of Moreno.

"We're almost there. By all the cars, I'd say he's having a party. Talk to you later, partner."

Sonny hung up, frowning, puzzled. Something bothered him, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

No matter, the taste in his mouth couldn't be ignored. He brushed his teeth and gargled, then showered. Lingering over what he was to wear took a few minutes. He dressed to attract the opposite sex: tight jeans, an open-neck light green shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows, deck shoes with no socks. He studied himself in the mirror, then decided the stubble needed to go and shaved.

Gusty winds came circling through the marina, grinding and tilting all the boats, creaking the hulls, clanking fittings against masts. It blew his hair into his eyes as he came above, and he swept it back impatiently, dug into a back pocket and pulled out a rubber band, jerking the top and sides back and securing the long strands in a ponytail.

Lurch was at his post, wagging his tail, its steady thumping reminding him of something, a similar sound...like a heart beating. A faint throbbing at his temples, a queasiness.

Putting a hand to his stomach, he felt it churn. He was hungry...for food, not blood. He wanted something to eat and some company tonight, in that order.

Time blurred. Sonny mingled with the tourists, the locals at Bayside, an outsider looking in, an observer. The shopping complex had become a Yuppie watering hole, the singles bars a meeting ground. He stayed away from the crush of people, content to remain on the perimeter until...he saw her.

She was beautiful, a lush figure poured into a sleeveless black dress, tanned, black hair with a bluish sheen past her shoulders, slim, muscled legs, the calves and ankles shapely, small feet encased in spike heels.

Blue eyes framed by sooty lashes met his, full lips curving into a smile, telling him she liked what she saw, too.

He was at her side, treating her to the full voltage of the smile he reserved for beautiful ladies.

"Hi, I'm Kendra." She made a face. "I know, awful, isn't it? My mother wanted to name me something different."

"I like it. I'm Sonny."

"You here on vacation, too, Sonny?"

He was distracted from her friendly chatter by a gnawing pain deep in his gut. Ignoring it, he took her elbow and steered her to a table, pulling out a chair. "No, darlin', I live here. May I buy you a drink?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I have to drive back to the Beach, and the way these people drive, I'd better have a clear head."

He leaned closer, taking her hand. "I have a boat here. Would you like to take a ride?"

"Well," she hesitated, looking at him through her lashes. "I don't know..."

Tilting her chin up with his finger, he gazed deep into her eyes. "You will go, won't you?"

His predatory smile didn't phase her. For a moment she couldn't speak. When she did, her voice was flat. "I will go."

Pulling her up, he slid his arm about her waist. "That's a good girl." All thoughts of food had been forgotten.

"Sonny!" He was a boyish thirty-something, with a slender, yet sturdy build, wavy dark blond hair combed back from his face, jeans, grey turtle neck, grey jacket. When Crockett scowled at him, he took Sonny's hand and pumped it, beaming a smile at Kendra, and said, "Of all the gin joints...who did I run into but my old buddy."

"Kendra, this is Nick." He started to brush past, girl in tow, when ice-blue eyes met his, intent, aware, measuring.

"Let her go, Sonny." He gently yet firmly freed her from Sonny's grasp. She blinked, but both men were gone.

Thwarted, Crockett was in no mood to talk. "How the hell did you get here so fast, Knight? I just talked to you this morning"

The blue eyes narrowed, the head cocked, the lips pursed. "You talked to me *yesterday* morning." He opened his mouth, about to deny it, but Nick's expression stopped him.

"Did something happen last night you'd care to tell me about?" The voice with its hard-to-place accent, its lilting cadence turned harsh. "I want a detailed report of what you did last night."

Knight sounded like a drill sergeant. Crockett almost told him where to get off, then decided to play along. "Okay, Sarge. Rico and I staked out The Wellsley Hotel on Collins. Nothing came of it but a waste of time and at sunrise I drove back to the marina."

"And when was that? What day?"

"Tuesday." Crockett's expression told him he'd better have a point to this line of questioning. "The stakeout lasted all Monday night."

"And what is today?"

"You're kidding."

Nick shook his head, eyes unblinking. He tapped the expensive Rolex Sonny wore on his left wrist. "What does that say? Not the time, the day." Crockett shoved it towards his face, but Nick caught his wrist and forced it back. "Look at it, Sonny."

Damn, the man was stronger than he looked. Sonny glanced at the date, the day, then back again, consternation flooding his features. "Thursday? That can't be right."

"Now I ask you again, what did you do last night?"

Startled, wondering eyes regarded him. "Are you telling me I lost a whole damn night?"

A minute passed. Nick still hadn't said a word then a second minute that seemed like a year. A few hundred yards out on Biscayne Bay a fully rigged pleasure yacht, maybe fifty feet, tooted its horn to alert a smaller craft not to pass its bow.

Sonny was thinking, Nick didn't know what, but he was hoping to be proven wrong in what he was assuming. "Look, I just got my days mixed up. Nothing happened last night."

"You were on stakeout again?"

They walked to the seawall. Sonny gripped the handrail and stared toward the flickering lights of the yacht. When he finally spoke, his voice was shaky. "No. Castillo pulled me off the case — gave me some time off, probably so you could mess with my head instead of some shrink. I...didn't do anything last night."

"Just like you weren't going to do anything with that girl tonight."

Sonny's eyes hardened and he started to say something, but Nick kept going. "I can smell it on you, Sonny, the blood-lust. You were going to kill that girl, weren't you?"

The knuckles gripping the rail turned white.

Nick continued, nodding. "Humans die — does it matter where or when?"

Crockett swung around, fists clenched, his eyes pits of hell. "I didn't kill anybody, damn you!"

"But you would have. What were your plans for her? Take her out for a ride on your speedboat, drain her and dump her body into the bay?"

"No!"

They stood toe to toe, eyes locked. "You don't think you're capable of such a heinous crime?" Nick persisted. "Believe me, Sonny, any vampire is capable of killing, even if that vampire is a cop, even if its against every principle he stands for. Because when the blood-lust comes on, it doesn't make any distinctions. Male, female, young, old, friend, foe — all humans are fodder to us."

"No! I wouldn't...I couldn't do that."

The agony in Crockett's voice made Nick shudder. He hammered even harder at the bowed blond head. "You don't know what you'll do. I crossed over in 1228, a violent period. I was a knight. I wanted power and life. I'd seen so much death during the Crusades — the earth reeked of the blood — I didn't want to die."

Crockett's eyes said that he wished he had. "So you sold your soul for eternal life. Well, that's your cross to bear, pal, not mine."

Nick's eyes flashed. "That's where you're wrong. It's the same burden for all of us. It's like an addiction, a craving we can't submerge. A darkness at the core of our being. It won't go away and it can't

be ignored."

Suddenly, a woman's face swam before Nick's eyes: Janette, her dark hair disheveled, leaning over him on the bed in the inn where they'd met. *Say good-bye to the light, Nicolai. Only darkness can satisfy you now.* The darkness was always there.

They'd made love — he'd wanted her like no other woman. She tried to warn him, but it only sharpened his desire. She was the lovely lure, leading him into the trap, and LaCroix slammed the door, locking him into an endless, forever night.

He shook his head to clear it of the memory. Sonny was watching, eyes narrowed, anger hardening his features. He was in a state of violent denial.

Nick searched for a way to reach him, but Janette's words, spoken so long ago, haunted him: *Can you feel my darkness, Nicolai? Feel it absorbing your light. Can you feel the power and the danger of my darkness? The beautiful risk. No matter how shining and good a knight you are, the darkness was always there. Always stronger than anything else in your heart and mind.*

"What kind of a person were you, Sonny?"

The past tense wasn't lost on him and he scowled.

"To help you, I need to know you."

"Look, I didn't ask you to come here, pal, and I don't need your help."

"Each individual is different, each reacts differently when the darkness takes over."

"What do you mean, darkness?"

"You have a son, right?"

Sonny's jaw stuck out aggressively. "What's he got to do with anything?"

"Did you take him to see *Star Wars*?"

The green eyes blinked, the mouth opened. "What?"

"There is a light and a dark force in every sentient being. Good and evil. When a person is made a vampire, the darkness already in him is enhanced, magnified a thousand times over, and can literally take over if that person is not on guard every moment until balance is achieved."

"The yin and yang of vampirism, right? You came all the way from Toronto to tell me that?"

Nick ignored the sarcasm. "You can't remember what happened last night. Why is that?"

A memory cork bobbed to the surface for a second, then was jerked under the murky waters of his subconscious. Sonny shook his head. "I don't know."

"I do."

With a terrible certainty, Sonny didn't want to know. He attempted to leave but Nick blocked his path, pushing him against the railing.

"You can't deny what you are; nor what you are capable of doing."

"I didn't *do* anything." The words came out between clenched teeth.

"You killed." Blunt, cruel, devastating.

Sonny ground his spine into the railing, recoiling from the knowing compassion in the blue eyes. "No, no... I..."

"Then what did you do? Why can't you tell me?"

Driven, Crockett seized Nick's arms, fingers bruising flesh. "I don't know." His voice was a broken rasp. He pushed Nick aside and fled.

Nick let him go.

Back at the boat, Sonny went to the head and heaved into the commode. Nothing came up, but his body was racked with spasms and pain. He willed it to stop. He could overcome it, dammit. Knight was wrong.

A wash rag hung on a rod beside the sink. He pulled himself to his feet, ran cold water over the cloth and applied it to the back of his neck, taking deep breaths through his mouth. That should calm the nausea.

Glancing up he saw a face in the mirror, not his own, the features rippling as if it gazed at him under water. He reached a hand toward the mirror, and the apparition backed away, its mouth opening in a soundless scream, eyes full of loathing and horror.



Cortez. Hadn't it been Cortez's body they'd found on the roof? Sweat slithered down his face as he tottered out of the head, his gait that of an old man. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Rico?"

"Hey, Sonny. I was just about to call you. Castillo found out about Cortez. It wasn't your ordinary gang killing. He was dead before he was shot. Showed up in the autopsy. Looks like the killer used Cortez' gun. His holster was empty."

Sonny cleared his throat, modulated his voice so that it sounded normal, casual. "Anything else weird about it?"

"Yeah, he may have been killed somewhere else because the body had no blood. Curioser and curioser, eh, partner? Castillo thinks it may be Santeria or more of that Voodoo stuff. Just what Miami needs, more weirdness."

The phone slipped from numb fingers. Rico was complaining about his ears when he picked it up. A crack ran down its casing.

"Sorry, man," he apologized.

"Is Knight there yet? Castillo wants him to call when he gets in."

"I'll tell him, Rico, I..."

"Sorry, Sonny. I didn't hear you. Sounds like you screwed up your connection when you dropped the phone. Sonny?"

Sonny had cut him off. Nausea returned and he gagged, hurrying to the head. Nothing so simple as vomiting could alleviate the pain. The bottles in the refrigerator couldn't, either. It would be like taking a placebo. Sugar water when he needed the real thing: red, pulsing with life — with fear.

He straightened, eyes spearing his reflection. He blanched. Instead of seeing himself as he was now, he saw a man in a dark silk suit, hair slicked back into a ponytail. The eyes were cold, devoid of any human feeling.

"No!" he shouted, striking the image with balled fists. First hairline cracks appeared, then pieces disintegrated, shattering into the sink. He cut himself on the shards, not even noticing, in a frenzy unlike any he'd ever known.

Blood ran in rivulets from his hands. He looked in the sink and a hundred Burnetts mocked him. He raised his hands, about to bring them crashing down on the slivers of glass, but was stopped.

Nick Knight grabbed him from behind, wrestling him out of the head. Sonny went limp and allowed Nick to deposit him on the bunk. Nick aimed a finger at him.

"Stay."

When he returned, Nick removed splinters from Sonny's fingers, then wrapped his hands in towels he'd soaked in ice water. Sonny rocked, the motion reminding Nick of autistic children.

"Sonny, are you all right?"

"He wants out."

"Who? Who wants out?"

"Burnett."

Nick was puzzled. "That's your cover name, isn't it?"

Sonny gripped his lapels, staining them crimson. "You don't understand. Burnett *is* my dark side."

Nick freed himself from the death grip. "I think you and I should have a talk."

They went topside, where it was cooler. Nick sat in one of the deck chairs. "Have a seat."

Sonny sat. He'd left the bloody towels in the hamper; the bleeding had stopped and the wounds were almost healed.

Nick pulled a crumpled, long sheet of paper from an inside pocket in his jacket. "Castillo faxed this to me before I left. I read it on the way here. I never believe what I read in black and white, Sonny. There are too many variations of grey, so, I ask you again, talk to me. Tell me your side."

His yellow sheet. Crockett rebounded to when he had been incarcerated at Metro Dade Police station and Rico had come to see him, telling him his rap sheet made Dillinger look like Bambi.

When he didn't respond, Nick perused the list of charges, whistling softly. "All this in two and a half months?"

The green eyes sizzled. "Castillo had no right sending you that. It's personal — it's supposed to be a protected file."

"You did this using your undercover persona?"

Sonny's reluctance was a third presence, it was so tangible. Nick sighed, then took up reading again: "Alleged murder of one Alejandro Gutierrez. Conspiracy in the murder of one Oscar Carrera."

Nick looked up, frowning. "Manslaughter: Yagovitch, Broward Sheriff's Office in Ft. Lauderdale."

Crockett still remained silent and Nick continued relentlessly, "Dealt in weapons, drugs, shooter for Manolo and Carrera until you arranged a hostile takeover and toppled both empires into the dust." His eyebrows crept toward his hairline. "Care to illuminate me on any of this?"

Sonny paced, his hands doing most of his talking. "I talked to the damn shrinks till I was blue in the face. What the hell do *you* want me to say?"

Nick rose, stretching wearily. He'd been cooped up in a Learjet a friend had volunteered to use to fly him here. They were getting nowhere. "Look, I realize you don't know me, but you must realize that I have to know you if I'm to help you deal with this. Tell me about those two and a half months."

Dead silence.

Finally, Sonny said, "I don't see what good it would do."

"I see." Nick folded the paper, his movements crisp, his manner abrupt. "Perhaps you can find some other vampire who's willing to nursemaid you. Count me out."

"Fine by me, pal."

Nick unfolded the sheet, jabbed a thumb at a place he had circled and read it aloud, "Attempted murder, Det. Ricardo Tubbs, Miami Vice." Blue eyes clashed with green. "Still not talking?"

His tactics worked. Crockett began speaking through clenched teeth, his eyes boring into Nick as he paced the deck.

"It started with a simple connection: Gutierrez of Miami to Manolo, who was moving his base of operations to Lauderdale. I was the middle man, only there to provide neutral introductions, plant some seeds of distrust and get out. There was an explosion — only Alejandro and I survived. I found out later he was behind it, although it still doesn't make sense. I suffered a concussion and a memory lapse. I guess you could call it full-blown amnesia. I went in as Burnett, I had his ID, his cover story, and when the doctors in the private clinic I was taken to filled me in..." He stopped, sighing, running his hands through his hair.

"They said you were Burnett — filled in the blanks with the wrong information."

Sonny nodded. "You got it. All I knew was what they told me. Burnett's a drug dealer. He was working on a deal for Manolo, and when I recovered I was taken to his place in Lauderdale. I did what I was told at first, but, evidently — my memory is spotty when it comes to this part — I wasn't satisfied to stay a shooter. I wanted more."

Nick tapped the rap sheet. "Sounds like you got it."

"Oh, yeah. There was no stopping me."

"And all this time your team thought you were killed in the boat explosion?"

A brief nod.

"What happened when they found out different?"

"Rico decided to find out what was going on, and set up a meet with Manolo. Yagovitch was his cop snitch: told him Rico was a cop, and also leaked it to him about one Sonny Crockett, who allegedly was killed in a certain boat explosion. I don't know whether it appealed to his sick sense of humor or whether he thought I'd turned, but he assigned the job to me to rid him of his problem." Pain flickered in his eyes and he stopped pacing, shuddering.

"I didn't recognize Rico. It was dark. I met him in the alley behind the art gallery Manolo owned." He passed a hand before his eyes. "I...shot him point blank in the chest...twice, and just walked on by, cold as you please." His voice broke. "He was my partner."

"No head shot?"

Crockett's look was one of disbelief. "What?"

"You shot him twice in the chest, but you didn't follow with a head shot. That's significant."

"If you say so."

"Go ahead. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Well, some of this comes second hand because I really don't remember a lot of it. Rico told me he was wearing a vest, and Yagovitch, which they didn't know was the bad cop at the time, saw him and told Manolo I hadn't done my job, so I was scheduled to be taken out of the picture by Yagovitch. Seems he was getting cold feet and Manolo wanted his loyalty set in cement. Rico says Castillo pulled in a marker and found out about Yagovitch. So had I, evidently. I'd stashed an extra gun in the boat we were to use in a deal that was a put-up job to get me off somewhere so he could whack me. He pulled a gun on me, I got into the boat and I shot him, then took off."

"After that it gets pretty sketchy. I went to work for Oscar Carrera after Manolo's operation was busted and Carrera's shooter, a low-life by the name of Cliff King, signed, sealed, and delivered Manolo. I was ambitious, to put it mildly. Never satisfied with anything but the top level of the organization. I used Celeste, Oscar's wife, to help put a permanent rift between Oscar and Mikey, his son, who had the hots for Celeste."

"Don't tell me. Celeste had the hots for you."

"As far as I've been able to piece this puzzle together, yes. I used her; she had a thing for powerful men and all the perks that go with the territory. Anyway, both Carreras ended up dead. I don't know how, although I'm pretty sure I engineered it."

"So you took over his operation? What about El Gato?"

"Gato was a sicko dealer, kind of a third party, an enemy of Oscar's. I guess I inherited him along with the estate and the business."

"Which was?"

Crockett looked as if he wouldn't answer. "Drugs. Don't ask me the volume; don't ask me how much money I made. I can't tell you."

Nick sat back down, folding his hands on his lap. "Can't or won't?"

"The amnesia makes things cloudy, spotty. Most of this I learned from reading my rap sheet and when I came back to myself."

"When did that happen?"

"After things started coming apart. King wanted to take over, discredit me, and spread the rumor I was sampling my own product. I was partners with General Salazar from Panama, and he didn't approve of my vice, so he gave the all-clear to King to..."

Nick held up his hand, stopping him. "That's when the second explosion, the car in the Grove, happened?"

Sonny nodded. "Ol' Cliffie-boy conned Celeste into setting me up, but she couldn't go through with it, and warned me. She got me out of there, found a doctor who treated me. My face and eyes were burned, but I got out of it lightly, considering. When she had him take off the gauze bandages I could see, but my brain was still reeling from the shock of the explosion. I think it was her fear that made me realize she'd been in on the plan, and I was about to pump a couple of slugs into her when I remembered.

"And that's when you went back to OCB and were arrested and escaped."

"Right. I escaped because I had to make it right. I knew about King and Salazar, and when I realized nobody trusted me, not even Rico — not that I blame them — I escaped. Cliff King looked like he saw a ghost, but I let him think I thought El Gato had engineered the plan to kill me. He was reluctant, but I persuaded him to tell me where the next shipment would roll in. I sneaked out and called Rico."

"And he and the cavalry showed up just in the nick of time."

Sonny smiled grimly. "Yeah, one of the men who drove the trucks made me for a cop. If they hadn't shown up when they did, I wouldn't be here today."

"Your cooperation, and the sizeable amount of heroin, plus all the pretty play toys the authorities confiscated, were instrumental in getting you off the hook, I presume."

Crockett's laugh was bitter. "That, and hour after hour with the shrink of their choice, having them x-ray my brain to see if I really had amnesia or went off the deep-end."

"But you *were* reinstated."

"I'll never figure that one out either. I.A.D. red-tagged my file a long time ago. With what they had on me, I never expected to be a cop again."

"Even Internal Affairs has to bend to the politics of contraband, my friend. I'm sure the D.E.A. had their fingers in this, although I can't prove it."

Crockett shrugged, hands going wide to each side. "That's my story, the best I can tell it."

"Let me get this straight. You were injured in an explosion, taken to the enemy camp, given the only identity they could provide you. In other words, they invented you: a person with complete amnesia is a blank slate, just waiting to be written on. They filled in the blanks all right, but with all the wrong information. You were in the Viet Nam, weren't you?"

The question took Sonny by surprise. His look was surly. "Yeah, so what?"

"So, although you'd like to believe Burnett is a separate entity, to place the blame on his shoulders, you can't. That persona is a part of you, a necessary part. It's your survival instinct, your cunning, your ambition, your drive."

"I think I committed cold-blooded murder. I have...these dreams...I see a pool of blood under my shoe. I'm holding a gun — it's still smoking." The words were wrenched from Crockett, and both men retreated into silence, needing to distance themselves from his horrible disclosure.

Nick chose his words slowly and carefully. "What happened to you happened to so many men in the war. There's a part of us that can only handle so much stress, so much horror, then it retreats. Crockett retreats, Burnett does anything he has to, to survive. You are both. Don't think of yourself as having multiple personalities. You have to achieve a balance."

Slowly, Sonny shook his head. He noted his hands shook as well, so he jammed them into his pockets. "I couldn't do the things they say I did when I was out there." His eyes looked bruised when he glanced down. "Could I?"

"Not then, Sonny, but what about now?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happened last night?"

"Anybody ever tell you, you have a one-track mind, Knight?"

"I'll show you, then." Nick stood. "Let's go back to the scene of the crime."

They took the Caddy to the Wellsley Hotel, parked in the alley and flew up to the roof. A chalk drawing showed where the body had lain, but there was no blood stain to mark it. They stepped over the yellow POLICE LINE: DO NOT CROSS banners and examined the scene.

"They marked the place where the sniper's rifle was." Sonny pointed to a large chalk oval on the edge of the roof.

"How did it go down?"

"How the hell should I know? I wasn't here."

"Weren't you?" Nick held up a gun encased in a baggie with a seal-lock. "I found this in your closet in the pocket of your jacket. Recognize it?"

Knight asked the question again when they came out of the morgue an hour later after viewing Cortez' corpse. Crockett had retreated into a morose silence. His answer was an incinerating glare.

"According to ballistics, the caliber of the bullet that savaged that man's throat matches this gun. Still no comment?"

Sonny turned on him, reacting without thinking, his right fist on a collision course with Nick's jaw. Halfway there, it was arrested, gripped by steel fingers and forced down.

Goaded beyond endurance, Sonny whipped free, his face a mask of anger. "What do you want from me? You want me to confess to killing Cortez? You telling me I shot him?"

Nick remained calm. "You really don't remember," he mused, then added, "This is exactly the kind of thing you — we — are capable of. The dark side of our nature is activated by the blood-lust. Let me paint you a scenario: you hadn't fed, the very thought disgusted you; you only took a swallow or two to appease the hunger, thinking you could beat it, clinging to a nature you want to be human, but isn't any more. You let it go until it was too late, until the craving became all-consuming, and then, you killed, you drained a human. Cortez, and the girl if I hadn't come along when I did. And...you'll do it again."

Crockett's Adam's Apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "You haven't got one ounce of proof." The gun was waved under Sonny's nose. "Don't I?"

"Okay, suppose I buy it. Why would I use the gun?"

Nick smiled slightly. "Simple. Misdirection, self-protection, to conceal the marks you made on his throat."

"Anybody ever tell you about innocent until proven guilty?"

"You're a vampire. Innocence has nothing to do with it. In light of what you told me, from what I've read in your file, you're a prime candidate to go on a killing binge."

The green eyes narrowed to slits. "Let's say I did it — just for the sake of argument. Cortez is no great loss: his gun was for sale to anybody who could meet his price."

The voice with its slight mellifluous accent took on an edge. "He was human."

"He was slime."

"And, as such, it's all right to drain the blood from his body, blow his neck to a pulp to hide the marks — is that what you're telling me? Just *who* is the slime here, Crockett?"

Nick's eyes glazed over. He no longer saw the Vice cop but another face: long, sharp fangs, feral eyes, mocking laughter — LaCroix, the one who had turned him.

In his mind's eye, he looked down on the stone altar at the young woman lying there, beautiful, eyes closed, bosom softly rising and falling under her gown that, as was the fashion, revealed a lot of her charms. Her hair was long and dark. She was for him, to initiate him.

LaCroix had stroked her hair, turning her head so that her throat was exposed. He had run a slender finger down the jugular, tapping the pulse that beat there. "You are thirsty, *mon ami*. Drink — her life for yours, a fair exchange."

"Must I kill her?" He had been horrified, yet couldn't take his eyes off her throat. He was so thirsty.

"Humans die, Nicolai. Does it matter where or when?"

LaCroix's code of ethics. Humans were nothing but a source of slight amusement, mingled with contempt, and to be used for food only.

"Wouldn't a little do?"

A snort from his mentor. "Perhaps you aren't cut out for this. Perhaps I misjudged you. I would hate to think so. I would be so disappointed."

A chill had run through him at the cold words, replaced by a heat that surged, pounded in his ears. He could hear the sound of her heart beating, the very blood in her veins calling to him. He bent to her, meeting LaCroix's eyes, a sneer coming to his lips. "You didn't." He felt the fangs lengthen, pricking his lower lip, so he opened his mouth wider as he lowered his head. "I can handle doing this if it's what I must do to survive." Her eyes opened in disbelief, in terror, as he sank his fangs into her throat. She'd only been stunned. The taste of her blood as it rushed over his tongue, down his throat, made sweeter by her fear, was like nothing he'd ever experienced. More, he wanted more. He wanted it all, and he took it, unaffected by her screams, her feeble flailing.

Fingers snapped before his eyes and he blinked. Crockett's expression was one of having the last of his patience sapped.

"You didn't hear a word I just said."

"Sorry." Nick shoved the memory back into its dusty little cubbyhole. "I was just remembering my first kill. A woman, beautiful and innocent, undeserving of her fate." He shook a finger at Crockett. "That doesn't mean any human being deserves having the life sucked from him or her."

The blue eyes, as they centered on the Vice cop, were speculative. "You have it within you to be a threat to humans, to yourself. The dark side of being a vampire is not what you prefer to call your Burnett persona — it is not a separate entity any more than your cover. It's a part of you. All humans have the capacity for evil. Most push it back to the corners of their psyches; a vampire doesn't have this luxury. Let's say Cortez pulled his gun and threatened you with it. Had you still been human, killing him would be self-defense. A vampire is not in mortal danger when threatened with a gun — even had he shot you, it wouldn't have harmed you, so it wasn't self defense. It was murder."

Sonny's shoulders sagged in defeat. He extended his wrists. "So, you're a cop. You have to take me

in."

"Aye, there's the rub," Nick said, ruefully. "I am a cop, and I should take you in, but I'm also a vampire. And I'm even extending to myself the properties of a lawyer in this case: my defense would be temporary insanity."

"No court of law would buy that."

"No *human* court of law, certainly. I guarantee no vampire would convict you. We have all had to go through this. We are all guilty of murdering humans until we were able to first identify the problem and then overcome it."

"Look, Knight, there's no Betty Ford Clinic for vampires. Maybe I should just turn in the gun and..."

"And what?" Nick interrupted. "It's an addiction, something you don't have any control over at first because you suffer memory black-outs and although you might suspect something, you're never sure."

"How come you're so sure I did it?"

"Before I came here, I talked to Castillo, and to your partner, who, before you become incensed, had nothing to say. Misplaced loyalty can be such a stumbling block." He sighed, rubbing his chin, then scratching the stubble a day and a half's travelling had caused. "I know you did it because I've lived through it."

Sonny touched his own chin, feeling it bristle against the pads of his fingers. He'd been surprised when it kept growing after he was transformed. "Seems to me I'm up a creek without a paddle here. The blood-lust comes on, the dark side takes over and I may or may not kill, but wouldn't remember one way or the other. How are you going to help?"

"It won't be pleasant, for either of us. When I look at you, at what's happening, I'm reminded of what it was like for me. That was a long, long time ago, and it still hurts." His eyes glistened. "I...killed a dear friend, a young boy who knew what I was, who served as my guardian by day. He was like the son I could never have. His father died of the Black Plague...so many died. His father signed him over to me as an apprentice and we left the infested land."

*England 1528.*

*Nicolai fondly patted the dark head that only reached waist high. "Our destination is Japan, Lucas, a place I've never been, so I can't tell you when we'll make landfall."*

*The man sighed as he waited for the ship to make port, closed his eyes and saw Paris. Sometimes it seemed to him that Paris was only a dream, and he had always been here, in the cold dark, the stench, the endless suffering as the Plague ravaged England. Japan held a promise of good things to come — a clean, proud people, the way of the warrior their way of life.*

*Lucas coughed harshly beside him, and Nicolai looked at him worriedly. Beneath the dirt and rags, Lucas, just having passed his tenth year, was little more than skin and bone, held together only by a stubborn refusal to die the same way his father had.*

*Nicolai looked away, anger and despair churning within him. His face was pale and fierce, but his eyes were what caught the attention of Captain Martine as he welcomed the few passengers who boarded his vessel. They were cold, savage — the eyes of a man who could do anything, anything at all because mercy and compassion were no part of his nature. Martine crossed himself when those eyes fixed on him as the man, giving only the title Lord Nicolai, shepherded a small rat-faced boy before him. He was dressed in cheap yet sturdy clothes under a pilgrim's cloak, and looked a far cry from the proud and fashionably garbed nobleman he claimed to be. Martine looked at the purse of coins in the man's hand and smiled. He didn't care what his patrons did as long as they paid their passage.*

*A month later, rigging creaked and sails billowed as the ship bounded through the high seas. Spray spumed over the bow, flying on the air like mist, but drew no reaction from the man who stood there, still as a statue, watching with the eyes of a hawk for any sign of land.*

*Lucas joined him, dark eyes worshipful as he gazed at his benefactor. "I'll bet were you the captain,*

we wouldn't have such rabble-rousing. They're convicts, the lot of 'em! A couple have even made lewd suggestions, they have. A vulgar bunch, M'lord."

Nicolai frowned. "Don't call me that, young whelp. And, if they fancy you, perhaps you'd better stay below during the day."

Lucas whipped out a carved knife, expertly cleaving the air with it. "Let them just try. My father, bless him, was an expert with the blade and he passed it on to me. I'm not afraid." Nicolai's smile warmed him and he returned it, tucking his hand into the crook of the man's elbow. "You're the one I worry about, M'lord. Your supply is getting quite low."

Something he had tried to keep from the little bugger. It was a long journey and he hadn't wanted to call undue attention to himself — besides, he needed the crew to get him to his destination. He cuffed the boy gently, and gave him a push. "Off with you for now." It was time to feed and he didn't want the boy to witness it, even though Lucas knew what he was and what he did to live.

In his trunk, under his travelling cloak were the four bottles of cow's blood left to complete the journey. A storm had played havoc with the great ship, tossing it far off course. The navigator had steered by the stars. By day the ship was becalmed, no wind graced the high seas; Nicolai knew he would run out before they reached any port. Tilting back his head, he drank the precious liquid.

A cry of distress reached his sensitive ears. "Release me, you wretch! Aw, no! No!"

Nicolai hurried to the cabin. The door was locked.

Inside the cabin, Captain Martine rubbed his hands in glee as two of his men toyed with the boy. Something crashed against the door, shaking it in its frame. The crewmen paused in their pursuit. Martine waved a languid hand. He'd already locked and bolted the door and pushed the heavy crossbar into place. A Captain manning a vessel full of cutthroats and villains couldn't be too careful. The door was secure. It could hold off an army.

"Quickly, men, lest he spoil our sport."

One of the men caught Lucas by the collar. The boy whirled on him, setting his teeth in the back of his hand, squirming free, only to finally be cornered, panting, eyes wild.

Martine pinned the boy's arms to his sides, glancing uncertainly at the door. The crossbeam was holding, but cracks were appearing in the door itself. What manner of creature could be out there? Could the boy's master be a vampire? After all, he always hid from the light of day!

The captain threw Lucas to the floor, forcing the boy's hands down and kneeling on his arms, pinning them as he tore at his clothes, baring his chest. "The dagger," he panted.

"He serves the devil. He must be sacrificed." The other men chanted, eyes rolling in their sockets. One stepped forward, handing his leader a jeweled dagger.

Nicolai beat against the unyielding door. It groaned and shuddered under his blows, but still held firm. He could hear what was taking place, and knew the life of his adopted son was in jeopardy.

Inside the cabin, the captain raised the dagger high over his head. Lucas struggled fiercely and wept tears of helpless rage.

The cabin door exploded inward, hurling Nicolai into the room. The impact knocked the breath out of him, but he was on his feet in a moment, glaring about him. Martine released Lucas and rose unhurriedly to his feet. The boy seized the opportunity to roll away, pulling his clothes about him.

"Spawn of hell. The sun will soon be on the yardarm. Your guardian shall prepare your way to hell."

Nicolai glanced at the dagger in Martine's hand, his face set, grim and unforgiving. "I have nothing to fear from your dagger." His voice was low and very dangerous.

The captain nodded to his men. "Attack, you curs!"

They approached, cudgels held at the ready.

"Watch out, M'lord!" warned the boy — he'd taken refuge under the captain's table. Nicolai sidestepped a blow with astonishing speed and backhanded the man. The force of the blow launched the man backward where he landed bonelessly on the deck, his neck at an unnatural angle.

"God save us!" The first mate backed away, his eyes widening in terror as he saw for the first time the elongated canines, the inhuman eyes. "He's the very devil himself!" He bolted from the cabin,

screaming.

Nicolai knew the situation could get out of hand and commanded Lucas to ready one of the longboats. Already his strength was fading as the sun began its slow ascension.

He blocked a vicious cut from Martine, but the force of it sent him staggering backward. The captain laughed at him breathlessly, his eyes hot and wild.

"You weaken. It's true what the legends say about the sun."

He swung the dagger and Nicolai gathered his failing strength, avoiding it at the last possible second, coming in close. Once eye contact was established, the man would be helpless. He was close enough — he seized the man's chin and forced him to look into his eyes. Martine froze, the dagger falling from nerveless fingers, clanging to the deck.

The second short sword he held concealed under his loose flowing shirt buried itself to the hilt in Nicolai's chest. The vampire shuddered, body going rigid, a groan torn from him.

He fell back, then slowly regained his posture. The sword, covered with blood, slid out of what should have been a gaping wound. Nicolai tossed it contemptuously aside, then came for the captain.

"Demon!" gasped another of the men, crossing himself. The other five stared as though mesmerized.

The captain was a superstitious man. He ripped at his clothes, wildly seeking the cross he wore around his neck. He held it up and Nicolai cowered back, snarling, fangs exposed.

Nicolai was forced to the deck, others pulling out their Rosaries; he was unable to fight, flinching away from the holy symbols, bane to the vampire.

"I stabbed his black heart and he didn't die," the captain shouted.

There was nothing to serve as a stake. They believed a vampire could only be killed by a stake of hawthorn. They had neither the knowledge nor the courage to kill a supernatural being.

"What shall we do with him, Captain?" his second-in-command asked as Nicolai thrashed on the deck, unable to escape. Only their symbols of Christ saved them.

"Tie him to the boom and let the sun turn him to dust."

"What about the boy?"

"He must die. He is the creature's protector."

"Jackals!" Lucas cried, going for the captain with his knife.

He was disarmed, thrown into a longboat and lowered into the sea. Nicolai put his hands over his eyes so he could not see the holy symbols and plunged over the side into the thrashing sea. He swam to the longboat, pulling himself aboard, not even watching as the ship bounded away.

His concern was for Lucas. There was an ugly bruise on the boy's temple. His eyes did not open when strong arms cradled him. Nicolai put an ear to the frail chest and blew a sigh of relief when he heard a strong heartbeat.

With the rising sun would come his untimely end, but he couldn't leave Lucas. Maybe this was fate; if so, he was willing to accept death, though he'd hoped for a less painful one. Lucas woke an hour later. Nicolai sat in the prow of the boat, an oar in each hand. He smiled at the bewildered lad.

The boy looked at him, then up, his expression turning to fear. "The sun, it's—"

Nicolai nodded. "I know."

Lucas feverishly searched the boat, coming up with a rain tarp. He tossed it over the man he considered his adopted father, making him lie in the bottom, shielding him all day from the sun.

The longboat had no food or water. Lucas caught a fish with a piece of twine, baiting it with skin he scraped from his wound. When it rained, he caught water in his cap, water-proofing it with some tar pitch that was aboard.

Once the sun went down, he helped Nicolai sit up, laughing as the vampire groaned, unable at first to unkink his muscles.

"With a little luck we'll be beating them there," he said cheerfully, with the optimism of youth.

Luck was not to be. Hours trudged into days — they were only able to maneuver after sundown — days into a week.

The boy was a genius when it came to procuring food and water for himself. Had his companion

*been another human they might have made it, but Nicolai was not human. He fought the craving for blood, ranging out at night, searching for prey, having to return to the boat and the scant safety of the tarp during the day. His resistance faded, replaced by a full-blown blood-lust.*

"Oh, God," Sonny's voice was soft. "Not the boy. How could you?"

"Yes, the boy." Nick's face was ravaged with emotion. "No matter how hard I tried to resist, I couldn't stop myself once the blood-lust came on. I drained him. How could I? The question to ask is how could I not?"

Crockett hesitantly patted his shoulder, and Nick shrank from the touch. He turned away for a minute, hunching forward as though in pain.

"What can I do?" Sonny asked after a moment.

Straightening, Nick pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose, unashamed of the tears that coursed down his cheeks. He wiped his eyes, then turned to face the Vice cop.

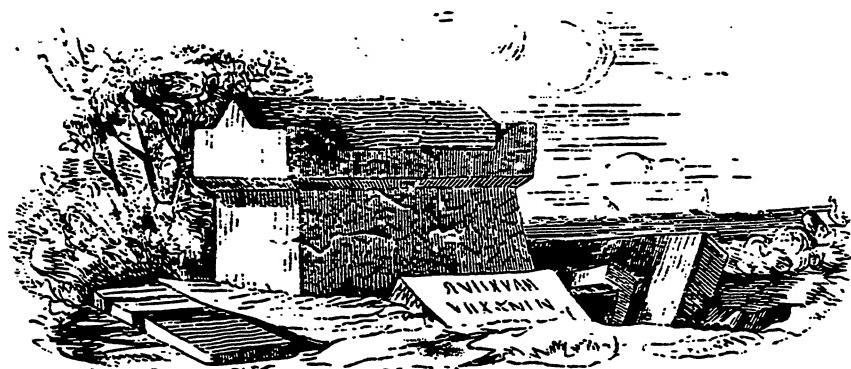
"You've already taken the first step."

Sonny was quiet for a moment. "Will you help me?"

Nick nodded and they shook hands solemnly. "Yes." A pact had been made, and the first step taken toward the future.

- The End -

*[This story is a sequel to "A Job I Can Sink My Teeth Into," by Karen Howard. In the earlier story, which appeared in Good Guys Wear Fangs 2, we see the gruesome tale of how Sonny became a vampire. In a future issue, Sonny will learn from Nick how to handle his new life.]*



## *Another Day With the Dead*

*by*

*Cheryl L. Connors*

[Editor's note: In the previous story (unrelated to this one), you were introduced to Sonny Crockett and his partner Rico Tubbs. Now meet their boss, Lt. Martin Castillo. A secretive man with a history of the deepest type of infiltration in southeast Asia and an extensive knowledge of things very esoteric and eastern (including a very subtle form of martial arts), Castillo has many depths, and is very much a loner. Several episodes of *Miami Vice* focused on his character and mysterious background, and he has drawn his own following. Striking with his whipcord-lean frame and heavy black moustache, portrayed to perfection by the fine actor Edward James Olmos, it's easy to see why many fan writers choose Castillo to star in their tales.]

\*

Martin Castillo was dying. He'd lived a violent life and some part of him had always expected to die the same way. But not like this. Not without a final blow struck. To die without a struggle was shaming, and a blind rage filled him at the realization that he was helpless.

With an excruciating effort, Martin turned his head on the pillow, trying to see the face of the woman who was draining his life. He could feel it slipping away, as if some great shadow pressed on him, smothering him, stealing his breath, his will. Castillo fought it, clung to life with all the tenacity, all the stubbornness he had learned from a hard life, but it was of no use.

The woman lying above him finally lifted her head to give Castillo a mocking smile. Rosa tossed back long, black hair from her face and the gleaming ribbon of scarlet on her delicate chin was the last thing Martin saw before the darkness claimed him.

\*

Another day ending. A hot wind swept across the busy city of Miami, carrying memories of death in its trail, blowing fitfully out to the bay where it slapped at a moored boat. Below deck, Sonny Crockett twisted in hot sheets, groaning, trying to fight the nightmare that coated him with sweat, sent useless adrenaline surging through his system. It wasn't until his threshing hand struck the wall behind him that the detective was able to break free from the strangling web of dreams.

*Martin is in trouble.* Not wanting to think about where this sure knowledge came from, Sonny struggled into vanilla linen pants and threw on a peach polo jersey. Slinging on his shoulder holster, the detective picked up a rumpled vanilla jacket from the floor of the cabin and ran up on deck and down the ramp to his Testarossa. As he gunned the engine and roared out of the parking lot, all Sonny wanted was to find his superior safe and sound and ready to scoff at his fears. But the detective had a sick feeling that that wasn't going to happen. Clamping down on a sense of dread, Crockett upped his speed, fighting

the remaining traffic as commuters headed out to the suburbs for the night. The sun, a huge hot ball of red, was already gliding down to kiss the water as the detective left the highway.

Only eight more miles to go.

But it was already far too late.

\*

Gravel spun under the Testarossa's wheels as Sonny tore into Martin's driveway. Jumping from the car, he noted Castillo's black sedan was parked in its usual spot. As he stepped up onto the porch he heard delicate chimes tinkling above his head in the cooling breeze that heralded the twilight. Pausing, Sonny felt his doubts resurfacing. *Cripes, it was only a dream. Maybe I'm being an idiot. Just cause Marty took a couple of days off doesn't necessarily mean something's wrong.* Sonny felt a wry smile touch his lips at the image of his superior's severe look when he'd have to confess he'd come because of a nightmare. A splintered memory from his dream touched Sonny then, and the smile slipped from his face. He shrugged. *What the hell, I'm here now anyway. Maybe I'll invite him out to an early dinner.*

Sonny knocked hesitantly on the door. Alarmed when it swung open as his knuckles grazed the surface, a reflex brought his gun into his hand. Trouble. Martin would never leave his door unlocked. Cursing himself for not calling Tubbs, the detective glided into the sparsely decorated rooms, straining to hear something, anything that would tell him what was going on. He did a silent reconnaissance of the first floor. Nothing.

Keeping his eyes glued to the second floor, Sonny edged carefully up the circular staircase that divided the kitchen from the main room. Stepping into the upstairs hall, he felt a cold chill crawl up his spine. Some ancient instinct chattered a warning in the back of his mind, an insane patter that screamed, Something's wrong here! Get out! Something's wrong here! Get out! Crockett told it firmly to shut up as he spun smoothly into the small spare bedroom. It was empty. Taking a deep breath, he eased into the open door of the lieutenant's bedroom. Casting an eye around the room, Sonny noted there was a lump in the bed. He couldn't see the face under the blankets, but it must be Marty. No one, and nothing else. Nothing seemed disturbed, but the warning in his head got suddenly louder.

*What the hell is Marty doing in bed at this time of day? I had an excuse. I've been pulling down mid-shifts this past week.* Doubtfully, Sonny wondered if the lieutenant was sick. If so, he hadn't reported it. The last rays of sunlight cast odds shadows into the room, dying the cream walls a bloody red. Swallowing, Crockett moved closer and whispered, "Marty?"

Sonny wondered why he was whispering, wondered why he still clutched his gun, his hand refusing to leave its cold comfort even as he told himself there was nothing here to harm him. The lieutenant didn't respond. Weird. With Marty's background, Crockett had seriously expected to find a gun pointed at him along with a familiar voice growling a command to identify himself as soon as he'd invaded Castillo's home. The worry growing, Sonny asked, louder this time, "Lieutenant? You okay?" Silence.

Giving up, the detective moved to stand above the king-sized bed, putting out a hand to touch the mound that had to be Marty's shoulder. Before his fingers touched the black quilt, Sonny realized what had been bothering him, what his subconscious had been nattering about.

Martin wasn't breathing.

Snatching the quilt back, anxious to deny the truth, Sonny stared down at the oddly pale, still face. He knew that vacant look. "Oh, God." He swallowed, feeling as if he'd been punched in the stomach. The lieutenant was dead. At the thought, the room grew dark as the last sliver of sun sank below the horizon.

It took a few minutes for Sonny to collect himself. Getting over the worst of the shock, he finally holstered his gun and started to think. He reached for the phone and froze at a soft sound. His heart beat like a trip-hammer. Cursing his imagination, the detective took a calming breath, stretching again for the telephone on the nightstand. That's when a hand reached from under the blankets to clamp around his wrist. A mad cry escaped Sonny's throat, and he tore at the cold fingers, struggling to free himself while his mind screamed, *This can't be happening! This can't be happening!*

Then Marty's body shifted on the bed, as though it was trying to sit up. This was more than

Crockett, already on the edge, could endure and he froze, unable to move, unable to breath. Helpless.  
It was bad.  
But then it got worse.

\*

Ricardo Tubbs smoothed a brown hand down the lapel of his grey Armani suit, giving himself a dimpled smile in the mirror above the sink. *Looking mighty fine, chum*, he complimented himself, and exited the locker area, heading for the squad room. Tubbs caught a glimpse of a blond head, and glanced at his watch. Almost six in the afternoon. Their shift had started forty minutes ago. He turned to greet his partner with a teasing grin. "Hey, whitebread. You're late."

There was no answering grin. When Rico got a closer look at Crockett, his smile faded into a frown, and he could only stare as his disheveled partner started to walk past him, seemingly oblivious of the New Yorker's presence. Not like Crockett at all, and his clothes looked rumpled, as if he'd slept in them. A stab of worry jolted Rico's stomach, and he stepped in front of his partner, forcing him to stop. Softly, Tubbs said his name, "Sonny?"

The tanned face turned to Rico, and something wild in the green eyes, a reflection of pain, of helplessness, told Tubbs that some disaster had driven Crockett to the point of madness. Rico hadn't seen that look since shortly after his partner's bout with amnesia when Sonny had actually become his cover persona. The detective had truly believed he was a drug dealer and a cold-blooded killer named Burnett - and had acted on that belief. No one was sure to this day just how many dealers Sonny had gunned down in the months he'd been one of the players. He'd been smooth, deadly, ambitious, and very, very successful. The acts Burnett had committed had almost destroyed Sonny's life...and his sanity, and the guilt of his deeds still plagued Crockett's days and haunted his nights.

In the hallway, the Southern cop frowned, as though trying to remember a name. There was no recognition in his eyes when he finally managed a token acknowledgement, "Yeah?"

"Man, it's me. What the hell's wrong?" Concerned, Tubbs put a tentative hand on his partner's arm, feeling tension in the coiled muscles.

"Nothin'." His voice sounded raspy, drugged. Sonny shrugged off the hand, then tried to move past the black man and into the squad room.

Refusing to be brushed off, anger lacing his worry, Rico grabbed for Crockett's shoulder and missed, managing to twist his hand in the collar of Sonny's polo shirt before Sonny could walk away. The Latino's green eyes widened when the tanned flesh of the blond's neck was exposed to the glare of the light.

"Christ!"

In shock, Tubbs let his grip relax and Sonny flinched away, his voice hoarse as he cried, "It's nothing. Leave me alone!"

Rico let him go, frozen. The rational part of him wondered why he was so alarmed, tried to explain the marks away, but another, more ancient part of his brain knew better and was afraid. Superstition and common sense battled as Tubbs tried to make sense of the twin incisions that marred his partner's throat. *Can't be what I think it is. Can it?*

The New Yorker caught up with Sonny before the blond reached the squad room's doors. Tubbs grabbed the man's arm and swung Crockett around to face him. "What in God's name happened to your neck? Your pet alligator give you a love bite? What?"

A large hand reached up to rearrange his collar, hiding the marks, and the blond's face contorted in anger. "I told you! It's nothing. Leave me the hell alone!"

This behavior went way past his hot-tempered partner's occasional outbursts. The blond looked almost enraged, but there was a steady fear behind the brittle anger. Rico refused to back down, and using both hands, pushed his partner against one wall, forcing Crockett to face him. Sonny struggled against him, his movements strangely uncoordinated, and that, too, frightened Rico. His partner seemed to be in a state of shock, functioning on adrenaline and instinct. Deliberately, Tubbs got an arm free and solidly smacked a hand across one side of Crockett's face.

Sonny looked across at him, surprise widening his green eyes, then sagged against the wall, a confused expression spreading across his face. He swallowed, sending a puzzled look around the lockers and hallway as though wondering how he'd gotten there. Crockett covered the black hand that pressed him against the wall with his own, and asked, his voice faint, bewildered, "Rico?"

Tubbs felt like sagging himself, in relief. It sounded as if his partner was connecting with the real world around him again. *At least I hope so*, he commented silently. The former New Yorker sent a harassed look towards the office ahead, and afraid of attracting unwanted attention, he dragged the blond with him back to the men's room. After Sonny's little visit to the twilight zone as Burnett, the detective couldn't afford to have any unusual behavior noted by the others. As always, Crockett was dancing on the fine edge, the number of reprimands almost keeping up with his decorations and recommendations, and he didn't need any more black marks on his record. Though, Tubbs had to admit, Castillo usually managed to keep Sonny from running into too much trouble.

In the harsh light of the bathroom, Rico could see Sonny's complexion was pale under his tan, his skin cool to the New Yorker's touch, his eyes dull. What worried Rico more was Sonny's attitude. His normally aggressive partner still seemed confused, oddly docile, the burst of rage completely evaporated. "Very, very strange," Tubbs muttered to himself, his concern deepening. After checking to make sure they were alone, he asked, "Sonny, please, man. You gotta tell me what happened. What's going on?"

The detective ran hands through tousled, sand-blond hair. "I...don't know if I should..."

"Tell me? Come on, pal. It's me, Rico. Your partner."

At the word partner, Sonny's head came up, a flicker of light brightening his eyes. "Yeah. I know."

Rico breathed a small sigh of relief. He was getting through. "That's right, man. I've stood by you through all kinds of crazy stuff. You know I just want to help."

The blond nodded, swallowing, and almost whispered, "It's the lieutenant."

"You saw Castillo?" Rico was slightly surprised, slightly jealous again that his partner was closer than he was to their boss.

"I knew he was in trouble."

The bluntness of the statement made Rico's skin crawl. Castillo was strange, but Sonny had a few odd things beside Burnett in his attic, too. Like his personal warning system that seemed too much like ESP for either of them to be comfortable talking about. Frankly, Rico didn't want to know about it. It made him nervous, even if it had saved both their butts on more than one occasion. Tubbs carefully didn't ask for details on how his partner had *known* anything about Castillo. "So, what did the lieutenant want? He okay?"

"The lieutenant wants me..." Sonny's voice trailed off. Shaking his head as if he had to pull the memory from some hidden place in his mind, he continued, "Martin told me. To find her. The woman..."

"What woman?" Rico prodded.

"The woman who..." Sonny's voice faded, and the wary look crossed his face again. The Southerner sent a searching look at the man confronting him, as if wondering if he could be trusted.

The look shook Tubbs. "Jesus, Sonny. Talk to me! Damn it, you know you can trust me!" Crockett winced at his tone, looking badgered, and Rico abruptly changed tactics, shocked anew at his friend's subdued behavior. Softening his voice, he picked up from where Sonny had ended, and coaxed, "Look, you want to help the lieutenant, right?" At a nod, Rico went on, "Well, I want to help him too. Tell me what we need to do to help Martin, Sonny."

Crockett lifted a trembling hand to touch his damaged throat. His face twisted as a memory resurfaced. "Oh, God. It was her, Rosa. She made him do this to me."

Tubbs eyes riveted to the concealed marks on his partner's neck, his breath quickening as he wondered if it really could be possible. What he was thinking. *No*, he denied angrily. *I can't believe I'm even thinking about it. There has to be another explanation. That kind of weirdness can't happen. No way.* Shaking off the ridiculous idea, Rico moved closer to the blond, his voice unconsciously revealing his disbelief as he asked, "The lieutenant did this to you? He cut you? With what, an ice pick? Why?"

Rico could hear his tone rise and saw his partner flinch again. He swore at himself, and said, his voice deliberately calm, "Sorry. It's okay, Sonny. I just want to understand, man. Just wanna help." Moving slowly, Rico put a hand on his partner's arm, trying to reassure him. Crockett's haunted eyes met

his, and Tubbs felt a wrench in his heart at the open fear there. It tore at him, but he ordered himself to stay calm. Stay cool. He had to deal with whatever had freaked out his partner. No matter what it was.

The door abruptly opened and Stan walked in, dressed as usual in one of his loud Hawaiian shirts. Their fellow detective gave them both a surprised look-over and then a coy grin. "Am I interrupting something?"

Sonny flung off Rico's hand, brushing by the chunky cop in the doorway to stalk down to the office. Tubbs followed, annoyed at the sudden termination of the conversation. Sonny had just begun to open up to him. Now he'd have to start all over with the stubborn cracker cop. Easing himself into his seat at his desk opposite his partner, Rico knew he had to get Sonny away somewhere where they could talk without interruption.

An idea crossed Tubbs' mind, only to be immediately dismissed. Another glimpse at his partner's now-shuttered face and the idea came back, stronger. Rico nodded to himself. The problem seemed to revolve around Castillo. So, it was only logical that he take Crockett and go to the lieutenant for the answers. Castillo was hard enough to pin down in person; Tubbs knew he'd never manage it over the phone.

It took a lot of persuasion. It was only after watching a complicated search on the computer render Sonny helpless and frustrated was Rico able to coax him out of the office under the guise of asking the lieutenant for more information. Somehow it never occurred to Sonny to pick up the telephone, and the mental confusion of his usually acute partner scared Tubbs even more than his manner. Rico felt a burning need to confront Castillo face to face, to demand to know what had happened to Sonny. As they left the Gold Coast building, Tubbs could only be glad that Gina and Trudy were at court, or they would have clued into Crockett's distress. Rico knew his partner, and any group attempt to pry out Sonny's secrets would only backfire on them all. He had to see this through alone.

\*

Rico volunteered to drive, and Sonny got into the green Cadillac without comment, leaning against the leather seats with an audible sigh. Tubbs flicked a concerned look at the drawn face, and decided to stop for food. Maybe it would help. Sonny picked listlessly at the stone crab he usually relished, and Tubbs gave it up. It was almost eight o'clock by the time they reached Castillo's house, and Rico watched with concern as Crockett's fingers tapped out a nervous beat against his knees as they drove. The nervousness was contagious and Tubbs, not knowing what to say, didn't try to start a conversation. When they pulled into the lieutenant's drive, Sonny seemed strangely reluctant to go into the waiting house, trailing Rico up the walk with slow steps.

Tubbs buttoned his expensive jacket, pulling it straight across his shoulders, smoothed his tie, unconsciously preparing for a confrontation. He didn't like confrontations with Castillo. He almost always lost. The truth was that the man made him nervous even after working for him for five years. He took a deep breath and raised a hand to knock on the door.

"He knows we're here."

His partner's unexpected voice made Rico jump and he swore out loud. Sonny reached around him and opened the door, crossing the threshold to enter the dim, almost vacant interior of the small house. Rico went past him, looking around, getting his bearings. He started when he saw a figure seated at a low table near the large French doors at the rear of the living room. Tubbs scolded himself for being so twitchy. At this rate he'd give himself a heart attack before the night was out.

Martin was sitting with his back to them. In the dark. Alone. As if waiting. For what, Rico wasn't sure. He eyed his silent partner and bit his lip. On the other hand, maybe he did know what Castillo was waiting for. At the thought, the dark figure rose and walked towards them with gliding steps, like a wary predator scenting prey. Suddenly, Rico was quite sure he didn't like this. As he'd told his partner on more than one occasion, Castillo was *strange*. Rico decided that coming here had been a very bad idea. He was ready to leave, right now, but the weight of his partner's presence at his back gave him no choice. He straightened. He could do this.

"Lieutenant?" Rico asked, fumbling for a wall switch. The sudden glare made him blink. When he opened his eyes, Castillo was standing before them, dressed in dark pants and his usual white, short-sleeved shirt. Rico had always regarded the lieutenant as a cold man, distant. A private man who rarely allowed his emotions to surface where anyone could read them. The man before him now was no longer repressed. Absolute fury, absolute rage blazed from his black eyes, giving off a heat that Rico could almost see as a haze around the Latino. Even knowing that rage couldn't be directed at him, still his heart leapt in reaction, his muscles tensing as if for flight. The questions Rico had wanted answered stuck in his throat.

Ignoring Tubbs, Martin's black eyes speared Crockett. "What did you find out?"

Sonny shook his head. "Nothing." His tone of voice told Tubbs that Crockett knew Martin wasn't going to like this answer. He didn't. A hand clenched into a fist, a molten look flashed across the lieutenant's face, and then the dark eyes pinned Rico.

"Why is he here?"

The question was aimed at Crockett, and the blond answered, "He's my partner." As if that were answer enough.

Maybe it was. Castillo gave the tense black man a considering look, then dipped his head. Acceptance. Tubbs saw the battered face relax slightly, the flaring emotions put under the normal severe control. The walls were erect once more, but Rico had a feeling they were very fragile structures. He didn't want them to break over him, but he had to know, had to find out before he went mad. "Lieutenant." Rico kept his voice calm with an effort. "I think I have a right to know what's going on."

Castillo gave him a cold look, then turned his back, walking away until he was in front of the floor-length windows. Rico wasn't offended. This was Martin's normal mode of communication. Definitely peculiar. But then a lot of what Castillo did was peculiar. The Latino looked over his shoulder at Crockett. "What did you tell him?"

"That you want to find Rosa." A betraying hand crept to the tanned throat, and Martin's eyes flashed to Rico.

Tubbs didn't try to lie. Castillo had always been able to read him too well. "I saw." He carefully put his hands in his pockets, a non-threatening gesture. "Did you...do that?" He couldn't bring himself to actually ask the question.

The dark head dipped and Martin's raspy voice said, "Yes." He sent another look at Sonny, a flash of pain crossing his face. "I had no choice. I regret it."

Tubbs went numb. He felt a hand on his sleeve and followed his partner to the small sofa set against the front wall. The New Yorker sat, staring across the room, wondering if he'd gone loco. He shook his head in protest. "Oh, man. It's not possible. It's crazy." He sent a pleading look at his boss. "I don't understand."

"I was dead." Martin faced them, still across the room, as if the space was necessary to him. "At least it felt like death." He cleared his throat. "Then I woke up. Crockett was here. And I needed..."

Sonny flinched at the reminder. Martin saw it, and looked away.

Tubbs couldn't take it all in. *How can I sit here and listen to this?* He looked a little wildly around the room. *How can everything feel so normal and yet be so weird?* He shook his head and voiced his doubts, "No way. I don't believe this. You can't be a god-damned vampire." There. He'd said it.

Castillo slid a hand around the back of his waist, removing a knife from its hidden sheath with fluid grace. Tubbs' eyes widened slightly at the sight. The lieutenant walked to stand in front of Rico, laying the edge of the blade against his own inner arm.

Sonny made a small sound of protest in his throat, but a look from Castillo froze him. The knife slid into Martin's wrist, across the heavy vein there, but there was no rapid gush of blood, only a thin trickle that dried and disappeared before it hit the ground. Before Tubbs' eyes the wound closed. The detective moaned, feeling his heart race in protest against the sight. It was real. It was all true, his suspicions, his fears.

The knife disappeared, and Rico looked up to see something then in Martin's face that he had never thought to see there. Shame. A shade of despair. Defeat. The dark head dropped, and the soft, ragged voice said simply, "*I'm hungry.*"

The two words sent a sharp wave of fear through both detectives. They locked eyes, not needing words to communicate. They knew exactly what Castillo meant. Tubb watched as Sonny's gaze drifted back up to the dark hungry eyes above him as though he had no choice. Reading the urgent need there, Crockett stood, his large callused hands automatically going to his throat, pulling at the collar of his shirt. Tubbs jumped to his feet, darting a quick glance between the two men, feeling his stomach crawl at the sight of his partner's actions, at the blank expression on his face. *Christ! What the hell did Martin do to Sonny? It looks like he's been drugged, or hypnotized, or something. Like he can't resist.* At the thought, the final shred of doubt faded from Tubbs' mind, and resolve took its place. Rico couldn't, wouldn't, let Martin use Sonny like this. No matter what it cost him.

"Keep your damn hands off my partner!" Tubbs stepped in front of Sonny as the dark figure took a step towards the blond. Almost panicking at the menace he felt from the lieutenant, he slid a hand under Sonny's arm and jerked him away from the Latino. Cold, black eyes tore from Sonny's dazed face to glare at Rico. Tubbs caught his breath at the raw power shining in those eyes. There was barely anything sane in that look, and it shook Rico down to his bones. He swallowed, fear overcoming his anger at Martin's abuse of his partner. Tubbs was far from being a fool, but he felt like one now. He had seen Castillo's deadly fighting abilities first hand, and did not, no way, want Martin to use those same skills on him. Especially now. Not when Martin had become something even more dangerous.

Hoping something of the man he respected remained intact, Tubbs tightened his grip on his partner's arm and pleaded, "Marty, please. You can't do this. Not to Sonny. Not after everything he's been through. Please." Rico swallowed again, tasting fear and added, softly, "You're stronger than this, man. I know you are."

The compelling stare faltered, and Castillo whirled, putting his back to the detectives. "Get him out of here! Now!"

Released from the power of the Latino's gaze, Sonny shook himself awake, giving Rico a wide-eyed look, pale and terrified at what he'd almost let happen. Tubbs shook his head in a warning to be silent, and tugged at his partner's sleeve to get him to follow him out the front door.

Before Crockett could protest, Rico spoke to Martin, "Lieutenant. Look, Sonny and I will get you...what you need. I promise. Please, stay here. Hold on. We'll be back as soon as we can."

Once outside, Tubbs didn't stop, almost dragging his partner down the shallow steps and along the drive. He wasn't sure if Castillo had heard his promise or not. Rico was simply grateful that he'd managed to get them both out of the house alive and in one piece. He wasn't sure if he could drive, but Crockett's hands were shaking even worse than his. Tubbs pushed Sonny toward the passenger door, then slid behind the driver's wheel, jamming the keys into the ignition, and roaring the engine to life. Only when the car was miles away from Castillo's house did he wonder at his own actions. Wonder why he hadn't pulled his gun. Maybe his gut had known it would be useless. A provocation that would have forced Martin to react in an equally violent way. Tubbs shuddered at what might have happened. What still could happen. They needed to get Castillo...his mind quivered at the word...blood, and get it to him fast.

\*

They pulled strings. They charmed. They lied. And in less than an hour Sonny and Rico were headed back to Castillo's house with four small plastic bags in a cooler riding in the back of the green Cadillac.

"Maybe we should open an account for Martin at the blood bank," Rico commented, half in earnest, thinking about the future.

"What?" Sonny give him a bewildered look, a tanned hand sliding to his throat in a gesture that was very quickly getting on Rico's nerves. Tubbs sighed. "A joke, man. Forget it."

"Oh."

Dead silence for another two miles. That was starting to get on Rico's nerves too. When he got nervous, Rico talked. When his partner got nervous, he got quiet. Too quiet. Tubbs cleared his throat, feeling another twinge of guilt at conning the hospital staff out of the blood. He consoled himself that the stuff was old, almost due to be discarded. And that worried him, too. Maybe Castillo would find it...distasteful. Rico flicked a glance at his partner and ventured a question. "You think Martin will be okay?"

Crockett gave him a shrug, big hands tightening into fists on his lap.

"I was scared there. At his house. When he came after you, Sonny. Christ, I wasn't sure if he was still *Martin*. You know? Whether he'd remember who he is, what he is, or if he'd turned into a..."

"A what, Rico? A monster?"

There was no mockery in the Southern's ragged voice, and they shared a silent glance that held a measure of the same despair that Martin had shown.

"We gotta help Castillo find the woman who did this to him, Rico." Sonny's voice was determined. "Maybe there's a way back for him."

"I hope so." Tubbs said it, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it. Rico had heard the fear in Sonny's voice and wondered if the fear was for Castillo, or for himself. There had been no time to ask before, but Rico asked him now, "What about you, partner? How you feeling?"

"I'm okay."

It wasn't the right answer. It wasn't enough. Rico wanted to ask more, ask what it felt like. What Castillo had done to him. Had it made him feel different? Feel weird? Sonny had managed to pull himself together for the dance at the hospital, but he was so close to the edge. Was he going to be okay? Rico had waited too long to ask; they'd run out of time. True confessions would have to wait. His heart beginning to beat faster, Tubbs swung the large car into Martin's drive.

The door was open, the Latino waiting in the shadows of his unlit home. When Sonny offered the cooler, it was torn from his grasp and their boss disappeared into the recesses of the house. The streetlight had cast enough light for Tubbs to catch a glimpse of the pain ravaged expression on the lieutenant's face, and he sighed with relief. Martin had managed to control himself. Sonny must have seen the pain too; the blond started after Castillo. Damning his partner's soft heart, Tubbs yanked him back on to the doorstep, and growled at him, "Stay right here, dammit!"

Sonny gave him an aggrieved look, then slouched against the door frame. Neither of them speculated on what the lieutenant was doing with the blood. They waited in silence until Castillo emerged from the shadows.

"Marty? You okay?"

Castillo answered Sonny's soft question with a nod.

Rico took a deep breath and said, "Lieutenant. We need to talk."

"Yes." Martin took a step back. "Come in."

Rico added silently, *Yeah. Enter freely and of your own will, and all that jazz.* It wasn't even remotely funny.

In unspoken, mutual consent, the three of them went to the kitchen to sit at the table there. Sonny flipped on switches as he went until the bottom floor was a blaze of light. When Castillo put a hand up to guard his eyes, both of his men froze, watching. The lieutenant dropped his arm, blinked in the fluorescent light as if testing his own reaction, then pulled out a chair. Tubbs slid into the seat opposite, unable to keep his eyes from Martin's face. He felt a desperate, horrible curiosity and kept looking for some sign, some mark that would show what Castillo had become. There was nothing, not even a drop of red to mark what he'd just...drunk. The lieutenant's reserve didn't allow him to just blurt out, "Hey, Marty, old buddy, let's see your fangs." Or did he even have fangs? Rico couldn't help thinking that some tangible indication would make the whole idea of vampires easier to handle.

The former New Yorker wondered how much the man would tell them. The lieutenant had never been overly communicative, as if every word he spoke cost him money. Talkative himself, Rico had often been left frustrated and annoyed by the terse Castillo. Tubbs shook his head, hoping his partner would do the talking for both of them. Crockett was usually the only one who could get Martin to open up in

any case. He turned his head to eye his partner, noticing that Sonny looked better, though deep, bruised shadows lingered under his green eyes. It hadn't escaped Rico's notice that Sonny had recovered his usual poise since they'd returned to Martin's house. To Martin's presence. The thought made him uneasy, and he put it on the back burner to worry about later.

"How are you feeling?" Sonny's question jerked Tubbs out of his reverie.

Castillo swallowed. "I don't know. Odd. Things are different."

"Like?" Rico prodded.

"Sounds. Lights. Stronger than before. Almost painful." Castillo made an abrupt gesture, as if terminating that line of thought. "It's not important."

*Not important?* Tubbs was surprised that he could say that, think that. Before he could question him further, Sonny asked, his voice gentle, "How, Martin? How did it happen?"

Castillo was silent a long moment, then started to talk. The story came out in pieces, as if the Latino found it hard to speak about the woman who had destroyed him.

Sonny watched the lieutenant, tried to listened attentively, but a part of his thoughts kept returning to his own internal struggle. He couldn't help sending another furtive glance at his partner, amazed again that this was really happening, that Rico was here and seeing the same things he was. Amazed that apparently he *was* still sane. That Martin was...he shied from even mentally thinking one particular word and substituted *changed*. Martin was changed.

With an effort, Sonny kept his hand from reaching up to touch his throat at the reminder. When he'd woken up the first time after he'd gone to Castillo's home, all he had were fragmented memories of the night before. He'd been drowning in a sea of overwhelming horror, of fear, and a sick sense of shame that he hadn't been able to prevent Martin from.... Again he flinched from the memory, skipping over it to the memory of fleeing Castillo's house with an emotional overload weighing him down, and a fevered command beating in his brain to find a woman named Rosa.

Rico had shaken him from his daze, saved him. Somehow. Crockett still wasn't sure how he'd done it. He could only be grateful. The detective gave his partner an unforced smile that barely moved his lips, and did another in an endless stream of mental and emotional self-checks. A part of Sonny wondered why he couldn't feel any anger at Castillo for the attack. Blinking at the stone-carved face in profile near him, he felt a surge of sympathy. The lieutenant was the most controlled, stoic man he'd ever met. Remembering Martin's adamant will when, stabbed through his lower back, he'd still managed to kill two KGB assassins in an effort to protect an old friend's family, Sonny knew the loss of control over himself must have hurt Martin worse than anything he'd done to his subordinate. He felt pity then, and tried to keep it from showing on his face. Martin would hate it, and Rico *would* think he'd gone mad.

Castillo had finished. Annoyed that his mind had wandered, Sonny pulled his attention back, summarizing internally. Martin had met Rosa at a charity event at the Japanese embassy. They'd danced. Then they'd left. Martin couldn't remember where they'd gone.

Sonny and Rico exchanged another in a series of worried looks. Not remember? Castillo? Sonny felt a surge of dread churn acid in his stomach. It was worse than he had thought. And he'd already thought it was as bad as it could get.

"How many times did you see her after that?" Rico asked.

A frown creased Castillo's forehead. "I don't know."

Sonny and Rico exchanged another look of concern. Martin caught it and his frown deepened.

"Try to remember," Crockett urged.

The Latino's voice slowed, went deeper, as he strained to remember. "There were other times. We met here. She wanted..." Martin's eyes widened. "Information."

"On what?"

A sheen of sweat covered Martin's forehead. He was obviously fighting himself. Finally, he managed to whisper, "The Taserno job."

Sonny mentally reviewed the case. It was a small potatoes deal; Switek was handling it with newcomer Abrams. Switek would be carrying two hundred thousand in small bills for a coke buy.

"Must be planning to rip Taserno's drugs off *and* the money," Rico commented. Coming off

another case, he and Sonny had been scheduled for back-up for Switek.

Castillo gave Tubbs an even look. "And kill all the officers involved."

Rico looked shocked. "Why?"

"Revenge. Rosa said I'd killed one of her brothers, put another in jail. The deaths of my men would be my fault." Castillo ran a nervous hand over his thick moustache. "She said she'd make sure everyone knew I'd betrayed my men."

Rico leaned over the table, "Christ, Lieutenant, it's going down tonight!"

"Call it off, Marty," Sonny's voice was urgent.

The lieutenant shook his head, his grim expression frozen into granite.

Sonny felt a quiver up his spine. So far, they'd believed Castillo was still the same man, still the same police officer they'd respected and admired. A man with the same loyalties. But what if Martin had turned on them? Crockett saw Rico draw back in his chair, as if suddenly wary, and Sonny knew his partner was thinking along the same lines he was. They'd been foolish. Trusted blindly. Rosa had done more than just destroyed Martin's life. She'd stolen his soul.

Castillo rose to his feet, and Sonny wanted to protest, argue him into reason, but there was a sudden blinding pain in his head, an echo of the same pain in his throat and Crockett sank back into his seat, his eyes closing. He heard Rico say something, but his hearing had faded, along with his strength, and his last conscious thought was, *God help us!*

\*

Across the city, another meeting was taking place. The house on Emerson Drive in South Beach was almost a mansion, and Rosa, her eyes glowing, twirled under a blazing chandelier and laughed with delight at her life. She loved it. She, a bastard child of the seamier side of Miami, living a dream life. Rich clothes, rich houses, rich cars. All she'd ever wanted. And the cost? She laughed again at the thought. Worth any price. At a footfall behind her, Rosa spun around, sending her full silk skirts flying. Tossing thick hair from her face artfully, she smiled up at the tall brown-haired man facing her, and dropped a somewhat awkward curtsy when he held out a hand. With an internal shrug, she'd learned to ape Andrew's old-fashioned manners. For some reason the man liked all the stupid games, all the pretence. It was annoying, but it cost her little, and she was willing to play along until she no longer needed the vampire who'd brought her over.

"*Ma petite.*" The tall man ran a finger along her chin. "Are you happy?"

"Very happy."

The doorbell rang, and Andrew frowned.

"My brother, and some of his friends," Rosa hastily explained.

The three young men were noisy as they came in, and the vampire's frown grew deeper as her brother, never discrete, began congratulating her on the success of her plans. Carl looked so handsome in the clothes she'd bought him, so proud, Rosa felt her heart soften and grow protective. He was so very young. She would see he did better than their older brothers. Rosa tried to shush him, but he was too willing to praise her, too eager to brag about his upcoming adventure to be silent.

Finally, Andrew put a hand on her arm, and Rosa let herself be guided into the library. The shelves of books intimidated her, and she gave Andrew a sullen look. He knew she didn't like this room. It was wrong of him to make her come here.

"What's going on?"

His voice was colder than Rosa had ever heard it. She shrugged. "It's nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me?" He repeated in an incredulous voice, an eyebrow lifted in affected surprise. "My dear, anything you do concerns me intimately." Long fingers dug into her wrist. "Tell me. Everything."

"Let me go!" Rosa felt her temper rise and twisted free. "It's family business."

"I was looking for a companion. An equal." Andrew set the armchair before the empty fireplace, one hand cupping his strong chin. Sneering to herself, Rosa thought he looked like he was posing for an ad for "Masterpiece Theater". Not that she'd ever watched it, mind you. She heard her brother yell a

farewell as he left, anxious to be in place for the deal, and wondered how much longer Andrew would drone on. She wanted to go along, keep her brother safe.

The vampire went on, "Apparently, I was wrong when I thought you were the one. I admit you're smart, beautiful, and have a certain degree of charm." Rosa smiled uncertainly, a little concerned at his tone. "And I've given you everything you wanted. But I see you can't overcome those gutter instincts you were born to. A shame. I guess it means I'll have to keep on looking." He surged to his feet, grabbing her wrists before she could react. "It also means I've left you far too independent." He smiled down at her, his eyes growing bright, overpowering.

Rosa tried to struggle, but it was useless. When Andrew was finished, he questioned her again, and this time she made every effort to tell him everything, eager to please. She couldn't help herself. It hurt too much to do anything else.

Andrew released her finally, and Rosa sagged into the chair he'd vacated. "A few more questions, and then I'll be finished with you." Rosa was too dazed to wonder what he meant. "Where is this policeman you used?"

"Dead."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep with him?"

Rosa shrugged. "Why not? I had to feed. It amused me to use him."

"Did he taste your blood?"

"No!" Andrew caught a quick look of worry, uncertainty in her face, and he grabbed her hair, twisting her face up to him. He leaned down and growled, "You stupid little witch. I warned you to be careful. You've endangered both of us." The contempt in his voice cut her, and she whimpered. "I'm sorry."

The vampire's thin lips curled. "You will be. Rosa, you have a problem. Fix it."

"I told you, Castillo's dead!"

Andrew stood above her, one hand lifted in menace. "Then bring his body to me. If he isn't dead, well, you'll take care of that first. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Then go."

Rosa fled.

\*

It was dark in the shadows of the warehouse, a solitary light swinging high above the two vice cops in the back of the open building. Switek caught another whiff of dead fish and tried not to gag. The fish processing piers weren't high on his list of favorite places. Abrams flashed Switek a strained grin at his exaggerated cough.

A voice whispered in their ears as the back-up team let them know the deal was going down. The two cops straightened, their attention focusing on a long-nosed dark car turning into the warehouse. The car slowed, the headlights flashed twice, and Switek and Abrams stepped out of the shadows. The front doors opened, and two men got out.

As if that had been a signal, there was a sudden flurry of shots. Switek, too experienced to die easily, hit the ground, screaming at his partner to do the same. There was no cover and Swi clawed at his gun, trying to defend himself, but the dealers were prepared and already in action. The passenger sent a stream of bullets from a semi-automatic machine gun at the floor in front of the cops, and they froze.

The armed man laughed as the driver moved up beside him, his hands wrapped around another M-16. "Looks like you cops are out of luck tonight. Your buddies are all dead. And you will be soon." Tony remembered what Rosa had told him to do. He'd decided the thin cop should be the one to live, and he dutifully repeated, "And you can thank your Lieutenant Castillo for tonight. He told us everything we needed to know."

A footfall sounded from behind the car, and the two dealers looked back at a third man dressed in

a dark camouflage outfit and a baseball cap that shadowed his face.

Tony called out, "Sal! You guys get all the bastards?"

The man nodded, and Tony frowned. That wasn't Sal. Eyes widening, Tony brought his gun up, but he was too late. The man was already closing in. Rosa's brother could barely register the idea that nothing human moved that fast before the stranger was beside him, a foot lashing out to strike Bobby in the throat. Then a gun was grinding in Tony's ear.

"Miami Vice. You're under arrest."

At the familiar sound of the lieutenant's voice, Switek let out a long sigh of relief. A dozen uniforms appeared, swarming past the car, and a voice came back over the radio plug in the chunky cop's ear. "Pick your lumpy self up off the floor, Stan. The cavalry has arrived. We got all the bad guys."

"Sonny?" Switek gave a hand up to Abrams. "Man, we thought you and Rico went AWOL."

"And miss the party? No way, pal," Sonny chuckled. "Look, we'll have show and tell later. Tell the Captain that Castillo has some unfinished business with the talent behind this gig, and Rico and I are going along for backup."

"Sonny," Swi complained into his mike, "the Captain's gonna be really pissed off at me. Can't you talk to him..." A sudden suspicious silence rang in his ear. "Sonny? Hey, Sonny? Damn." Stan sent a hopeful glance in the lieutenant's direction, but he was already gone. Of course. Switek heard a voice lifted in anger and winced. At a sudden thought, he sent a calculating glance at Abrams, and in a wheedling tone said, "Mikey, old buddy. What do you say..."

He didn't even get chance to finish. Abrams had overheard the conversation on his own receiver. He gave Switek a grin and said firmly, "No way, man. Sonny told *you* to do it."

The captain rounded the car and saw Switek. Stan swallowed, and tried a placating smile on for size. "Why, hi there, Cap'n...."

\*

It was dark in Martin's house. The shadows falling there were old, familiar friends that hid him. Hid what he had become. Castillo sat in his house, silent, filled with anticipation. It might not happen. He might have to go out to hunt her himself. But some instinct told him that it *would* happen. Tonight. Here, where she knew where to find him.

The front door opened, and a faint smile touched his lips. Amazed at the changes in himself, Martin could hear the footsteps, hear the separate breaths, even pick up the faint heartbeat of the intruder. It had been hard to cope with the changes at first, even just sitting alone in his house. Worse when he'd left its sanctuary to protect his men, but he'd managed. Barely. At the warehouse, the raw need, the desire to kill, to tear and rend flesh had threatened to break through his tenuous control. It was better here. Alone.

Almost alone. She was in the room with him now, and Martin knew she must be able to sense him as easily as he sensed her. He knew why she'd wanted him dead and disgraced; he remembered her family. His head bent, Castillo wondered if it might be better if he *had* died. Crockett wouldn't now be suffering from his uncontrollable hunger. Not for the first time, shame flooded him at his inability to deny the demon that had possessed him. Even now, the memory of the hot, meaty taste of Sonny's blood made his mouth water. And that disgusted him.

"He wants you dead, Martin." Rosa's words echoed Castillo's thoughts, and he almost smiled as he stood to face her. Even in the dark he could see her perfectly well. Rosa's face was twisted with hate. "And so do I."

"He?"

"Andrew." The woman shook off his question with an impatient hand. "I made you, Castillo." Her voice softened, became cajoling, "You can't fight me. I own you. Stand still, Martin."

It was odd, what that voice did to him. He didn't move, didn't even breathe as she walked closer, the hand behind her back coming out, a thick sharpened piece of wood in her grip. "That's it, Martin, yes."

"For God's sake, Marty! Do something. Fight her!" The tinny voice in his ear shook him from

her glamour. Castillo remembered what Rosa had done to him, what she'd planned on doing to his men. Rage filled him, and Martin shook off her hold on his mind. His ability to do so should have warned her. Instinct should have ordered her to run. If it whispered in her ear, Rosa ignored it. The woman hefted the stake and darted in, obviously believing that Martin's unfamiliarity with his newly acquired abilities would give her the edge.

Outside, with night-sight binoculars trained on the scene from their small borrowed watercraft, Crockett shook his head, feeling no pity for Rosa. It was obvious to him that the vampiress was confident of her strength, comfortable with her power. It wouldn't be enough. He'd seen Martin fight before. He and Tubbs exchanged a look, and Rico started the engine, moving in to Castillo's dock. The lieutenant had ordered them to stay out of it, and they'd obeyed. Now they both wanted to be there. Just in case.

There was nothing more coming in over the microphones planted in the house. Rico paused while securing the boat to ask, "You sure you're okay?"

Checking his ammo, Sonny tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice as he answered, "I'm fine, pal." Truth was, he was still a little shaky, the accumulated shock and blood loss finally catching up with him. His eyes feeling grainy, Crockett wanted nothing more than a chance to crawl between two cool sheets and sleep for a week. Taking a deep breath, he leapt lightly to the dock, followed closely by Rico as they sprinted to the back of Castillo's house.

As they pushed open the glass doors, they saw Martin and Rosa locked in each others arms, the stake still held in Rosa's hand. There was a grim look on Castillo's face, and Sonny knew what was going to happen. Reholstering his gun, he tucked his hands into his armpits, and let his gaze drift down to the floor. He didn't want to watch. Crockett winced when he heard the death cry, but he made no move to interfere. There was no doubt in his mind. This was justice.

A light went on, and Rico flashed him a worried look when Sonny glanced at him. His eyes followed Tubbs to where Martin stood before them, his dark hair in slight disarray, his white shirt torn, hanging loose from his pants. Unselfconsciously, the lieutenant rearranged his clothing. He didn't look at either of them. He didn't speak. He was waiting. Sonny read that much, but damned if he knew what Martin was waiting for this time. Crockett knelt, putting two fingers on the woman's throat. Rosa was dead. Hopefully, she'd stay that way. And she hadn't dissolved into a little pile of ashes. How inconvenient. Now they'd have to figure out a good scenario for the coroner. Clearing his throat as he stood, Crockett tried to think of something to say. Martin spoke before he could figure out anything that didn't sound stupid.

"Andrew."

Sonny nodded. He knew what Castillo wanted, needed. "We'll find him. Together, Marty. We're a team, remember?"

"Yeah, and a hell of a team at that," Tubbs commented sourly. The black man tapped himself on his chest. "A former zombie." He laid a hand on Crockett's shoulder. "A sometime sociopath." Tubbs then glanced at Martin. "And a real-life, blood-sucking vampire. We should advertise."

Sonny shrugged off the hand, feeling the familiar stab of shame at the reminder of Burnett's hold on his soul. "Let's cut the chatter, pal. Rosa's dead. The worst part's over."

Rico met Sonny's eyes and slowly shook his head. He knew his partner didn't really believe it either. Martin had managed to remain true to himself, but he *had* changed. Forever. How were they going to handle it? How was Castillo going to handle it? Rico's green gaze shifted to pin the newly created vampire with a wary look. "Partner, it hasn't even started to be over."

The End.

[Episodes referenced are: *Mirror Image*, *Hostile Takeover*, and *Redemption in Blood*, the trilogy of stories in which Sonny loses his memory and becomes Burnett; *Bushido*, in which Castillo first kills an old friend and then defends the man's family from the CIA and the KGB; and finally, *Tale of the Goat* in which Tubbs goes undercover in a Haitian voodoo cult. And look for a continuation of Castillo's search for the being ultimately responsible for his vampiric state in *Good Guys Wear Fangs 4*.]

## *Closing the Wounds*

by

*Adriana I. Peña*

*[Note: At the beginning of the last season Vinnie Terranova, the original "Wiseguy," had disappeared, presumably the victim of a Salvadorean death squad that he was investigating. He was presumed dead, and given a funeral, with his boss, Frank McPike, giving the eulogy and revealing that Vinnie was an undercover cop. Nevertheless, his body was never recovered...]*

\*

"Vinnie will come looking for you. Do better for him than you did for Eric."

"What? Who..?" Roger Lococo asked, still numbed with sleep.

"You know what I'm talking about, and what to do. Now do it."

The phone went dead.

Roger stared at it, as if hoping that it would answer his questions. Where was Vinnie now? What had happened to him? The dial tone was his only answer.

\*

*It was a long corridor, bathed in light. Vinnie Terranova knew that he had to reach the end, and that when he did he would understand where he was, and what it all meant...*

*"You can't go any further, Vinnie."*

*"Peter?" It was his brother Peter, just as he had seen him alive last. He had seen his body at the morgue, not much later, when he had had to identify it. He had run down the white supremacist group that had murdered Peter, but that had not healed the wound in his — or his mother's — heart. Yet Peter was now next to him, as if nothing had happened to him; his priest's collar, which had been torn and bloody in the morgue, was now white and fresh-starched, and his clothes were immaculate. No bloodstains, no broken bones, none of the signs that showed what a fragile thing a human body is could be seen in Peter now.*

*"Yes, it's me."*

*"You're dead, Peter, aren't you?" It wasn't what he wanted to ask. But what did he want to ask? If only he could think, if only he could remember what had happened, why he was here...*

*"You can't come with me. Your time has not come yet. You must go back."*

*"Peter...where am I? What is this place? How did I come here?"*

*"You came here the same way I did. Bearing witness to what you believed, faithful unto death. But you can't join us."*

*"I'm dead, dying? Is that why I can see you?"*

*"No, you're not dead, and you must go back. I'll go with you. I'll show you where to go."*

*"Roger Lococo...I was told to find Roger Lococo," Vinnie remembered. "He...he told me to find Roger Lococo."*

*"Then I'll help you to find him."*

*Eric...* Roger hugged himself shivering. Why now did they talk of Eric? He had tried not to think of Eric, tried to forget him. But Eric wouldn't be forgotten. This call in the middle of the night brought it all back. And the guy at the other end had talked of Vinnie...

Vinnie was missing. After Roger had tried to reach him on the phone, he had gotten through to Vinnie's boss, Frank McPike, and McPike had told him the whole story. Vinnie had taken it upon himself to investigate a Salvadorean death squad operating in the U.S., and had, seemingly, paid the price for his daring....

The guy who had called him had said to do better for Vinnie than he had for Eric...

Oh, no...not that.

What had happened to Eric could happen to Vinnie. And that must mean that now Vinnie was like Eric had been... He closed his fists, remembering Eric. He owed him. And he owed Vinnie much more. If it had not been for Vinnie, what would have happened to him...? He owed both of them, and he had to pay it back.

He knew then who had made that call. No, not the name, but the reasons why that person had called him, why that person had chosen him to save Vinnie the only way possible. Now he had to hold up *his* end. He had to get a few things ready. It wouldn't be so difficult; he had learned with Eric how to do it. He probably had most of the supplies at hand, and what he didn't, Vinnie could survive a couple of days without. He would draw the curtains tight in the extra room, and set the cot so that his friend could rest. As for the rest, Eric had taught him how to improvise.

He found the hypodermic where he had put it away, so long ago. Ever since he had...taken care...of Eric. He had used it one last time, and then no more. He had thought to get rid of it, but had not. Not that he thought that they would partner him again with another of Eric's kind, but he simply could not think of parting with it. Another memento of the choices that were forced on him, and of how he had come not to mind, how he had come to accept it, and think it natural.

He recognized now the relentless seduction that had been waged against his soul. He was doing his patriotic duty for the U.S., he had been told. He stood ready to serve his country, wherever in the world he was sent. He had been willing to hurt and kill anyone, guilty or innocent, that stood in the way of his mission, his holy crusade against the enemies of his country... The things he had done... He had been in Hell, and not known it.

If it had not been for Vinnie, he might be in that Hell still, and he would have lost all will to escape. One more year of hanging around the likes of Mel Profitt, the crime lord who helped to arrange convenient coups and armed takeovers in the Caribbean, and he would have been lost. If Vinnie Terranova had not infiltrated the Profitt organization in order to bring Mel down, if he had not reminded Roger of what his ideals had once been, and that there was indeed a difference between right and wrong, he would still be helping Profitt and his ilk. Until there was no difference between himself and those he thought he was just using for the sake of his country...

He owed Vinnie for that.

Vinnie could be sent straight into that same Hell from which he had rescued his friend Roger Lococo. Only for Terranova there would only be one way out. Eric's way.

"I am sorry, Eric..." he said. At last he understood what had happened to Eric, and why. At the time, he had believed the explanation that he had been given as to why Eric had become...unreliable. But that wasn't the truth. Had he been told the truth of anything, ever? Perhaps his bosses believed what they said about Eric; it allowed them an easy conscience. It helped you to sleep at night when you told yourself that your victims were not truly human, he knew by his own experience. And he wasn't the only one. Look at the Tuskegee experiment. How else could those doctors live with themselves, letting syphilitic patients remain untreated, and record how long it took them to die, unless they believed that poor black men deserved no better? And Eric's differences went a lot deeper than the skin...

Eric had lost his last shred of humanity, he had been told, and there was only one thing to be done when that happened, so he had done it. And then he had gone on to this next mission.

The knock at the door told him that Vinnie had arrived.

"You're almost there, Vinnie," Peter said. "You can't falter now."  
"I'm tired. Why can't I stay with you?"  
"You can't, not yet. But you will rest when you get where you're going."  
"I'm thirsty. Don't you have any water?"  
"Roger will take care of you. Now go in."

Vinnie fell into Roger's arms when he opened the door.

"Find Roger..." Vinnie said. "I must find Roger."

"You found him. You're safe here, Buckwheat." Roger saw that Terranova's eyes were glazed, unable to focus. Probably in shock. And he'd probably not gotten any decent rest since he had escaped from the plane — or been dropped from it. He probably was hungry as well, and that might make him dangerous. At least to someone who didn't know the "Vulcan nerve pinch," as Eric had called it. He used it on Vinnie now. He wasn't taking any chances.

Vinnie fell down to the floor, and Roger sighed. Yes, just like Eric. Only he hoped that for this one the end would be different.

He dragged Vinnie to the room and laid him on the cot. He threw a blanket over him. Even though he no longer needed protection from the cold, there was psychological comfort in finding oneself covered, and Vinnie could use all the comfort that he could get. Roger saw Vinnie's body relax further, and nodded. Yes, just like Eric.

He pulled up Terranova's lip, and saw the teeth lengthening.

Vinnie was hungry, *very* hungry. Which meant that he had not fed on the way, and that was a relief. He didn't want to think of the complications if he had. But on the other hand, he should have something ready for when the ex-agent woke up. Fortunately, he was prepared.

Ground liver wasn't properly blood, but it would do. After all, Vinnie had just made the transition, and his system could still handle human food. It would fill his friend's stomach, and relieve his worst symptoms. As for the "flavoring," he would take care of it right now.

Roger slid the needle into his forearm vein, and saw the collection tube fill up. Just the way he had taken care of Eric on more than one occasion... Just the way he had fed Eric one last time before he had...terminated him with extreme prejudice...

Eric had known how it would end when he had laid himself on the cot and accepted the glass that his friend and partner Roger Lococo offered him. There had also been heroin in the blood, added at the last moment, to make Eric's last moments as pleasurable as possible. That had been all he could think to make it better... Dumb, but that was all he could come up with.

There would be no heroin in the blood that he offered Vinnie. Terranova did not need pleasure. He needed courage and information; he needed to be alert for the dangers that awaited him. Lococo put the tube of his own blood next to the ground liver. The Chinese meal approach, Eric called it. The typical Chinese meal was rice in bulk, with some strong sauce which had the extra nutrients and flavoring to make it a complete meal. It was the same way with the kind of blood that vampires took. Vampires didn't need that much human blood, but they needed some. Animal blood was a lot easier to get, without having to answer a lot of questions, so that was the bulk of what they took, and then added small quantities of human blood for trace elements. Usually a couple of tubes from a medical laboratory would be all they needed twice a week.

A moan told him that Vinnie was waking up. Roger stirred the liver in the glass one more time, and considered adding some Dutch Courage to it, but decided not to. Not much help in that. Keeping a clear head was what would help Terranova the most.

Vinnie swallowed the contents of the glass as soon as Roger gave it to him; he didn't look at it. Then he emptied the small collection tube. As soon as he had finished, his eyes focused again.

"Thanks. I was very thirsty."

"I know you were. But you'll be all right now."

"Yes, I will. I got away, didn't I? They were going to kill me, in the plane...throw me out..."

"But you escaped. Remember how?"

Vinnie frowned. "There was this guy. He looked at me kind of strange. He asked me my name. When I said it, he asked me if I knew you. Then he...he...he did something. I don't remember. He told me to look for you. Then I was out here, in the city, looking for you."

"What was this guy like?"

"Tall, balding, with a bent nose..."

"I know of him." Roger grimaced. Yes, he knew of him, and knew that he probably wasn't long for this world. He was beginning to crack, as vampires who worked for the Agency tended to do. His days were numbered, and perhaps that was why he had done what he did to Vinnie. A small rebellion against those who controlled his life and death, and also a small revenge against a human agent who up to now had enjoyed rights denied to him. One last defiance before he was considered too unpredictable to live. In any case, Vinnie would have to bear the consequences.

"He did something to me..."

"He drank your blood and gave you some of his." Roger decided that it was better to be blunt. At least now Vinnie was too tired to bolt, and the approaching daylight increased his tiredness. "This forced the change on you. That's how you survived being dropped from the plane."

"Dropped? Drank my blood?" He remembered now. He saw in a flash the long teeth arching towards his throat as he lay helpless, bound hand and foot. And the words filling his brain, telling him to find Roger Lococo.

"Louis Anthony is a vampire. There are a number of them who work for the Government, all of them for the same agency. And that agency takes care that vampires officially do not exist, and that their folders are Top Secret with the word EXPENDABLE written on top..."

"Roger, you're saying..."

"I'm saying that there are such things as vampires. That intelligence agencies know of them, and use them. And that now you're one of them."

"No..."

"Vinnie. You're in trouble. If you're going to survive, you've got to listen. Don't try to argue with me. There's so much that you've got to know. Starting with this: Don't ever try to contact your mother or Frank or Mike or Amber. Don't try to get in touch with anyone you ever knew before."

"Why?" He didn't have the strength to argue, to deny this crazy idea of Roger's.

"Because they'll hurt you without meaning to. Because they still trust the system, they still refuse to believe the Government could do the things that I know that it does. They'll deliver you into slavery without having any idea what they're doing."

"This is crazy!" he managed to protest.

"Vinnie, don't argue. You just drank a tall glass of blood. Look at the empty glass. Smell it. You're resting on a bag of earth. That's why you *can* rest. You need contact with earth. It doesn't have to be that nonsense about it being your 'native soil,' but it does have to be some sort of ground. And you're getting sleepier and sleepier because it's getting closer and closer to dawn."

"No..."

"First, you can't afford to panic. It's not like in the movies. But you have to be careful. I don't want you to end up like Eric, or like that poor bastard who infected you is going to end up soon. I don't want you to get deep-sixed after they've used you up, which is what the Agency does to vampires. You can survive on animal blood for the most part, and for what little human blood you need, all you have to do is attach yourself to any medical lab that does blood tests, and get the tubes that are thrown out. Anyway, that's where you're likely to find others of your kind who may contact you, or may not. Stay out of trouble, keep a low profile, and you can have a decent life. But that is if *they* don't catch you. If they do, no matter what they promise you, you walk into the sunlight; it'll be quicker and cleaner."

"I can't believe it."

"But you will. You have no choice but to believe me." He saw Vinnie's body slump with the approach of dawn. "Get some rest now. When you wake up we'll talk. Just remember, don't panic. While *they* don't know that you're alive, you'll be all right."

\*

"Peter." He was back in the corridor now, next to his brother. "I had this strange dream..."

"It wasn't a dream, Vinnie. This is a dream." Peter reached down to the crucifix that he wore around his neck and lifted it. "Or rather, this is not a dream, either."

"Roger Lococo had this crazy idea that I've turned into a vampire." He looked at Peter's crucifix and took it in his hand. "If he was right, I couldn't do this."

"He told you it wasn't like in the movies. There's no reason why you should fear this, or any of the holy symbols."

"But Peter, this is nonsense..."

"You've seen weird things before, haven't you?"

"Not as weird as this."

"Vinnie, we could argue about this back and forth, but that won't make things any clearer. Just listen to me. There is a reason why this happened to you."

"A reason?" Vinnie wished that he could get rid of the cobwebs crowding his mind, and that he could sense the reality of what was happening to him.

"There are things that need to be done. Special things, and to do them you must...change. But not in any way that matters. There is no reason for you to lose what you value most. There's no reason for us not to be together. We're brothers, who both sought to uphold righteousness in different ways, and we both gave our lives for it. Only you must remain among the living a while longer — you still have a mission to accomplish."

"A mission? A mission for God?" Vinnie said, sardonically.

"Yes."

"A vampire on a mission for God?" Vinnie could not help but laugh.

"Surprising as it may seem, yes."

"But why me?"

"Because you have undercover experience." Peter smiled sadly. "That's why you were chosen, and not me. I could never lie as you did."

"It wasn't lying. It was..." Vinnie began wearily, knowing how hollow the words sounded.

"It was lying." Peter said with sad certainty. "I know, it was justified, for the sake of the good you sought to accomplish, but still your soul paid a penalty for those lies. You know the price you paid, you know how it tore you up inside when people that you had befriended, that you had come to like, in spite of the evil they had done, had to be delivered to justice. It was the right thing to do, but it hurt you. You still dream of Steelgrave, don't you?"

"Sonny..." Steelgrave had been his first target. He had successfully brought down Sonny's crime empire. But he had not expected to like Sonny Steelgrave as much as he did. He knew that the mafia boss's crimes deserved punishment, but he liked him as a person, had had fun in his company, and had rooted for him to win in his struggles against fellow gangsters... In the end, he had done his duty, and had watched Sonny commit suicide rather than allow himself to be brought to trial. He had mourned him for a long time, all the while knowing what Sonny was, and that what he represented had to be destroyed... "Is Sonny here?"

"No. Not here. But you might meet him later. If you do, be wary of what he tells you. But you see what I mean, why you've been called for this. You learned to endure the pain that was the price for your actions. You know what it is to make hard choices, and still are willing to take that burden upon yourself. For the sake of truth and justice."

"Peter, a vampire has to prey on others for blood."

"It doesn't have to be preying. Roger can tell you of a way to do it. Listen to him. Then we'll explain to you a better way."

"We?"

He noticed another presence near them. He could not make out the features, but could sense great pain radiating from him, a deep, gnashing pain that had begun to heal...

"When you wake up, ask Roger about his partner Eric," the newcomer said. "He may not want to, but he has to tell you everything, for his own sake."

Peter took a chain from his pocket and showed it to Vinnie. "You know what this is?"

"It's your medal. I found it in the car they used to kill you. That's how we knew who had done it."

"You didn't have it with you when those guys came for you, did you?"

"No, I had left it in a drawer."

"Take it. When you wake up, you'll have it in your hand, and you will know that what I told you is true."

"Peter..."

"You'll wake up soon. You will listen to what Roger Lococo has to say to you. Don't waste his time and yours trying to deny what happened. If you still doubt, look at my medal."

Vinnie swallowed. He knew then that all of it had really happened. The dream wasn't a dream. What he accepted calmly because of his feeling of unreality wasn't unreal. He was now... He could not finish the thought. The idea revolted him. Had he really drunk that glass of blood that Roger had handed him?

"It's time to go back, Vinnie. Roger's waiting for you."

"Wait! I want to talk to you..."

"You'll see me soon enough. Just stare at the medal and call on me, when you need to. But not now. It's Roger that you have to listen to now."

"Roger?" Vinnie opened his eyes and sat up. "Are you here?"

"Yep. I am. Have you thought about what I told you?"

"I...I dreamed of Peter." His fist closed, and he felt the chain inside it. He opened his hand and saw Peter's medal. "He said that if I had this in my hand when I woke up, then I would know that it had really happened."

"And it did?"

"Yes. Peter told me...to listen to what you said. He said that there was a reason why this had happened to me, and that one day I would know it."

Roger nodded. Nothing surprised him in this business. And if Vinnie believed this, it might help him survive better.

"He told me to ask you about Eric."

Roger shivered, but answered him. "Eric was my partner for two years. He had been in intelligence since World War II. The Agency had found him out, when he was new at it, so he didn't know what he'd walked into. They try to catch the ones that are new at it, the ones that don't know enough about themselves. The old ones know better, and won't be taken alive. They offered him the standard deal, and he accepted. He'd work for us and we'd protect him, especially protect him from his own 'evil nature'. He was on a lot of missions after that, and he taught me a lot. He taught me my trade. And he taught me about vampires. I learned how to care for him, and I did. Then one day I was called by my superiors and told that Eric had become 'unpredictable', that his 'evil nature' had won over his last vestiges of humanity; so I should get rid of him. They told me to execute him."

"And you did."

"At that time I believed enough in what I was doing." Roger hugged himself. "And I believed in doing what I was told. Also, Eric was killing innocent people for their blood, so I could see the need for it. So when Eric came that last night, I offered him a tall glass of blood. I also gave him some of my own blood, and I helped him lie down on that cot, the same cot where you're sitting now. Then I...waited for a little while until I knew he would give me no trouble, and I pounded a stake through his heart as I had been instructed." He looked bleakly at Vinnie. "You know that I used to be a killer, that was my trade. Eric was my target that day."

"I... I'm sorry."

"They offer vampires the same deal all over. Not just our country. The KGB has quite a number

of them on their payroll. So does every other spy outfit in the world. And they use them until they become 'unpredictable'. Or rather, until the job gets to them. Then they get rid of them. They know that they'll get rid of them in the end, and the one object of the game is to get as much profit out of them as they can before they become useless."

"We all lose our humanity in the end; is that what becoming unpredictable means?" Dread mounted in Vinnie's throat as he spoke.

"Hell, no!" Roger shook his head violently. "Never believe that, ever! That's what *they* want you to think. It's just that what they're made to do gets to them. You know that the job does to all of us. You know of undercover cops who kill themselves, you know of those who go over the other side. You yourself cracked once, didn't you? You had to take time off to get your mind in working order again?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you knew just the good side of it. You never seriously doubted who the good guys were, nor the bad ones. I can't say the same for myself." He shivered, remembering the things that he and Eric had done. "I lost my moral compass. Everything that I did could be justified, and so I justified it. Human life didn't mean that much to me then. And vampires can't handle it any better than I did. At least, Eric couldn't. He had started during World War II, when there was little doubt who the bad guys were. It was possible then to be in this dirty business and keep your moral center. Then the Cold War came, and it wasn't so clear-cut anymore. He got sent to Third World countries, where he could see entire populations used as pawns in geopolitical games. He helped those that he would have gladly destroyed, and helped destroy those that he would have helped, if it had been up to him. I came from Vietnam, and I still hated the Reds, so I didn't question. But he remembered how it had been once, and it got to him. He could see what he was doing, and he couldn't live with it. Then he...he went over the edge."

"What did he do?"

"He killed people for their blood."

Vinnie shivered.

"I confronted him with it. And he said that at least it was more honest than what he had been doing. He had no innocence to lose, so he might as well do his own killing, instead of the Agency's"

Roger choked a sob. He rubbed his eyes, and waited until he could speak calmly enough. Vinnie waited for him to compose himself.

"So they had him killed for that."

"Yes, they don't object to killing, only to killing not in keeping with the mission at hand. They said that of course Eric was not human any more, and that he had finally gone completely over to his evil side. It's baloney, but they believe it, and I believed it too. Eric *didn't* believe it, not at the end."

"And you maintain that it was just that the job got to him." Vinnie could feel Roger's pain and anger ready to flare up again, ready to protest again at what had been forced on him.

"Of course. Same as it got to you at one point. But he had it much worse than you ever went through... Vinnie, you had drug dealers as targets, didn't you? You got a few of them in jail."

"Yeah."

"And you could feel good about yourself afterwards. Well, we were not so lucky. We *protected* drug dealers. We helped them bring drugs into this country. Because they helped us in those Third World countries where we were playing games! Vinnie, I was...Eric was, what you were sworn to destroy! And I thought that it was my patriotic duty to do it!" Roger was shouting. "And I didn't care! I could go through streets in neighborhoods torn apart by drugs, and I thought I was doing the right thing! Eric knew better, but I didn't listen. And he didn't know how to fight back. He was caught. I think that was why he did it..."

"Start the killing?"

"Yes. I told you what he said to me. He challenged me to prove that what he was doing was any worse than turning over those who were fighting for a better life to be tortured and killed. Certainly it was no worse than helping drug lords. I told him that if he didn't stop, someone else would find out. So he said that that was the idea, that if people found out what was going on, what the Agency was doing, maybe they'd put a stop to it."

"He wanted to be caught..."

"So as to expose the Agency and what it did. I don't know if he planned it, but he wanted to get back at them, and that probably made sense to him. He wasn't very rational at the end."

"But he didn't have to kill for the blood he took..." That still nagged Vinnie. He would have to find blood soon enough, and he wanted to know.

"No, of course not. And he might have never become a killer if the Agency hadn't caught him. But think about it. He was trained as a killer. He was put in situations that destroyed his moral compass. Did you really expect him to have much respect left for human life? No more than I had left."

"And he couldn't get out any other way."

"Vinnie, all vampires fall under the jurisdiction of the same Agency. No one else can have access to them. And the people in the Agency tell these stories of how vampires are no longer human, and how they eventually become wholly evil. And vampires believe it, and so they let the Agency dictate the terms of their lives. What the Agency doesn't tell is the truth, which is that vampires are no longer U.S. citizens; they no longer have any rights at all. They can't demand a change of assignments. They can't resign. They can't ask for vacations. So of course, sooner or later they break. They truly would have to be devils to do all that is asked of them, and remain sane, and they're not. They know what they have betrayed, and can't forget it, no matter how they try. The jobs that the Agency gives them are the nastiest, dirtiest ones. They're used, and used up, and in the end they run across someone like me."

Roger was weeping silently as he spoke. Vinnie stared at him and put his hand on Roger's shoulders.

"Was it hard for Eric, when it happened?" he asked gently.

"He knew that it was going to happen, when he laid himself down, knew that I was to be his executioner. I was afraid that he would fight me, but he didn't. He just sighed, and said that it was better to have a friend by him at the end. He said that he was tired of fighting them, and maybe it was best that way. He also said that he couldn't get out, but that I could. And that I should try to break free, and find a way to expose the Agency, that the Agency was the real monster, and one that no one knew existed. He asked me to find a way to let people know what was going on, and bring an end to it."

"You started it."

"Yes, that was why I didn't kill you when I was ordered to. But I did kill Eric. I gave him some of my blood with heroin in it — he had become something of an addict by then — and he laid himself down, and closed his eyes. He said not to be afraid to hurt him. That I should do it with one blow."

"And you did?"

Roger nodded, weeping. "At least he didn't suffer. And then...then I tried to forget about him. I had just killed my partner, the one person who was closest to me, the one that I trusted with my life over and over, and who had always come through for me. That's what the Agency does to you. It takes all your hopes, your dreams, your ideals, and trashes them, till you have nothing left!"

Vinnie frowned. "And they might want me as they wanted Eric?"

"Yes. And if they catch you, you'll end up like Eric. You'll die inside day by day, until your partner is told to get rid of you. And you'll be as thankful for that as Eric was."

Vinnie let Roger weep, and said nothing. He could see the pain there, and wished he knew how to stop it. He was also afraid of what the future held for him.

Only after Roger had calmed down a bit did he ask, "What can I expect if they don't catch me?"

"A relatively normal life." Roger wiped his eyes, and stared at Vinnie. "You need to shelter from the sun, and need to lie over earth, any kind of earth, forget that nonsense about your "native soil." You'll need blood, but most of it will be animal blood. You may need about twenty ccs of human blood twice a week, but that's relatively easy to get. Haunt medical laboratories for it. Now they have these biohazard bags where all the blood tubes are thrown away, because of AIDS and other diseases. Just remember to put the tubes back in, and don't let the contents spill anywhere else, because others can come in contact with it, and be infected. You don't need to worry about AIDS or hepatitis, but you will be the only lucky one in that lab. Think of the blood as toxic waste. They don't count the tubes that are in the bag, but they turn green if they find any one of them outside it. Don't let them see you digging into the bag,

because that's a big no-no in medical labs. You can always hypnotize people to forget your being there at all. You may find out that some of the personnel at the labs, the night shift, are vampires too. They may befriend you or not."

"They may not?"

"The fact that you used to be an undercover cop will not make them want to trust you. They already know what kind of deal people like me offer them. If they think that you're recruiting them, or flushing them out for recruitment, they may kill you. That's something else that Eric said. He said that the others knew what he was doing, and as long as he didn't try to recruit anyone they tolerated him, but if they ever suspected that he had sold any of them down the river, they would execute him. As it was, he didn't have to worry about them. Only me."

Roger was trembling again, reliving again the moment when he had killed his best friend. Vinnie again steadied him with his hand, and waited until he stopped shaking.

"It sounds so...lonely." Vinnie said at last.

"You'll have to bear it."

"You said not to contact my mother, nor Amber. I understand Frank and Mike, they work for the Government, but can't my mother, at least, be trusted? And I trusted Amber with the knowledge that I was an undercover cop, and she always kept the secret."

"Both your mother and Amber will eventually tell the authorities, because they won't understand what they're dealing with. They'll honestly believe that they're helping you. They, in their innocence, will trust the system to do what's best for you. But for you all the system has is the Agency, and all that the Agency wants with you is to put you through the treadmill, get as much use out of you as possible before you crack, and once you crack..." Roger gestured with his hand over his throat. "That's the only way that a vampire quits the Agency."

"So I can trust no one." Vinnie felt fear crawl into him. He would be alone, completely alone out there...

"Not for a while. But you've lived like that, haven't you? You're trained to survive. And nothing keeps you from making new friends."

"I don't think that I could bear to make friends like that again...not like Sonny," he blurted out.

"Don't make friends like Sonny. Make friends of those you like and admire. And don't destroy them as you did Sonny. You no longer have any duty to hurt those who befriend you. You're free that way. You have the skills that were taught to you, but you don't have to use them to harm others, not even for the 'greater good.' "

"I don't know if I can do it."

"You will." Roger smiled at last. "You're resourceful and likeable."

Vinnie nodded, not wholly convinced.

His hand closed on the chain from which Peter's medal hung. He remembered Peter's words, and the promise made to him.

"Roger...I need to be alone, to think"

Roger nodded. "Yes, you may need to. Just don't leave the apartment." He got up and wiped the tears from his cheeks. "I'm going to look up a few addresses and phone numbers. Call me if you need anything."

Once he was alone again Vinnie stared at the medal. "Peter," he said. "Peter, talk to me. Tell me what's happening, and why."

*There was no warning. In the flicker of an eyelid he had left Roger's apartment, and found himself in the light-bathed corridor, with Peter by his side, and the other one a few feet from them.*

"Peter, this is real, isn't it? It's happening to me?"

"Yes, it is."

"But why me?"

"Because you may be able to stop the Agency's evil," the other man said.

Vinnie turned to him. "You...you're Eric, aren't you?"

"Yes. I was Roger's partner and best friend. And I was cruel enough at the end to let him kill me, knowing what it would do to him."

"You didn't fight him."

"If I had fought him, I would have killed him. And he was the only friend I had left. If I killed him I would have nothing. What is the point of living on if you lose all you care for? And worse, what if you are the one that destroys it? It was selfish of me, but I preferred that he be the one who suffered. He could recover, he could still escape and lead a better life. Now he can, thanks to you."

"Was he right about what he said, about what being a vampire is like?"

"Yes. But you don't want to dig too much into biohazard bags." Peter said. "It's basically digging into trash cans, and it will be hard for you to keep your self-respect if you do it too often."

"But how, then?"

"You must earn it. There are people out there who are hurting, who need help. You must help them, and once you have helped them, you can take payment. You can start by volunteering at a homeless shelter. There are people there who desperately need help of every kind. They certainly need it a lot more than the little blood that you'll take from them. And if thanks to you they can turn their lives around, if they can get back to a normal life, then you will feel good about what you're doing."

"It's very important that you feel good about yourself." Eric said. "If I had not been so ready to believe that I was an evil, unclean thing, I wouldn't have delivered myself into the Agency's power. And they held power over me with that. I didn't believe it at the end, but I believed it long enough for their purposes."

The place changed again. He was sitting at a long table, in a dark room, facing a lighted screen, with Peter sitting across from him, and Eric standing up, using a pointer on the screen.

"Where are we?"

"A place we both remember. A briefing room. You know what one looks like, and so do I. This room comes from both our memories."

"You're briefing me..."

"The Agency can't continue as it has been doing." Peter said. "It has done too much evil already, and will not reform on its own. They're the ones that protected the death squad that got you."

Vinnie stared ahead, at the screen, at the furniture, at Eric standing like so many other speakers that he had faced through briefings...

"You have to be very sure of yourself before you tackle them." Eric was saying, in the pompous tones that speakers with pointers used. "If there is ever any self-doubt in you, if you ever feel guilty about taking blood, then they'll have you for breakfast. They're very good at what they do — they had a long time to practice it."

"But they're human..."

"Are they?" Peter asked. "They're part of the Agency. You might say that they've sold their souls to it."

"Peter is speaking metaphorically," Eric added. "You don't need to look for devil worship in them. But you must never underestimate them just because they don't have powers like vampires do. That was my downfall. The Agency is an organization, a bureaucracy. Do you understand what that means?"

"I think I do."

"There's no way you can." Eric's pomposity had an undertone of pain as he spoke. He was sharing knowledge that had been acquired at great cost, and he couldn't help remembering the hurt. "An organization, a group of human beings assembled for a common purpose, is more than the sum of its parts. People are its parts, but they're replaced. Some people drop out of it, some join, sometimes it consists of more people, sometimes of less. Still, the organization doesn't change much. Soon it begins to mimic a living organism. It can grow, when it takes in more tasks, and more personnel. It can decay, and even die, when it loses personnel and tasks to accomplish. It can reproduce, spawning small organizations of its own. And soon it acquires one more characteristic of all living things, a drive to survive, to grow, and to reproduce. Left to itself, it will add to its workload, and personnel. If it is in

danger of losing its purpose, and dying, it will reinvent it."

"Like the March of Dimes, which once the cure for polio, its initial goal, was achieved, switched to preventing birth defects?"

"Perfect example, Agent Terranova. But the March of Dimes is a benign organization. Or rather, since all organizations are amoral entities, could not become truly malignant because it operates in public view, and is thus subject to correction when it oversteps its bounds. Organizations have no innate sense of good or evil; they have to be taught how to live in a civilized community."

"But the Agency was never taught that." Peter added. "It's a secret organization. No one outside it knows what it does, so no one outside it is in the position to teach it right from wrong."

"The Agency's original purpose," Eric continued, still pompous, "was to help defend the United States against foreign threats, by any means necessary. That was the idea at first. But if there are fewer enemies, then the organization may not be needed. The organization understands that, and protects itself. It then influences the foreign policy of the United States to make sure that there are always enemies, and that it is always needed... It's still in a benign stage, but other countries can show what happens when such an organization gets out of control. That's how police states start."

"And that's what I'll be going up against if I try to change it."

"Yes. It took me a long time to understand how dangerous and powerful it is," Eric said, and this time real emotion seeped into his words. "It has its own immortality, because the people that compose it can be so easily replaced. It has the memory of thousands, stored in its files. It has knowledge gathered from everywhere, also stored in its files. It can call on resources, gathered patiently through the years. It has more power than you could ever wield, as a man or as a vampire. And, some time ago, this agency found out what other similar agencies know, that vampires exist, and that they can be used. The Agency then developed its own technique to deal with them, and it's a damn effective one. You go against it right now, and you're dead meat."

"But we'll make sure that you don't tackle it until you're ready," Peter said, softly. "The first thing you have to remember is that you have to be sure of yourself. You have to be comfortable with what you are."

"If you're not, then they'll offer to take responsibility for you, and you'll accept that deal. It's a very powerful temptation, to let someone — or something — take care of you. Only the price is too steep."

Vinnie grimaced, thinking that it could be very tempting, in his condition, to put the choices he would have to make on anyone willing to shoulder the burden.

"You can do what you have to do when the time comes, Vinnie," Peter encouraged him, "and in the meantime, there are plenty of ways for you to keep busy."

"You think I can do it?"

"I'm certain that you can. It won't be as hard as you think it will. And Roger is right. You no longer have to destroy those you befriend. Actually you'll have to help them. It will make all the difference in the world for you."

"There are other things you must know." Eric had mastered his emotions again, and was all business. "About the sun. You must keep out of it as much as you can, but you can expose yourself to it if you're carrying earth on you. Stuff your pockets with it, wear it around your neck or your waist. Any way you choose, it will protect you. Always sleep on earth. If you don't, you won't rest well, and be out of sorts because of it. It can be any kind of earth, as Roger said, and if you start a compost pile in the backyard, and start a topsoil-selling business, then you have an excellent excuse to be seen carrying earth in your pockets. People will tag you as being into organic farming, and let it go at that."

Vinnie nodded. "Do I reflect in mirrors?"

"Oh, you reflect fine," Eric laughed. "Certainly I would have blown my cover quite quickly if I didn't reflect. Do you know how many mirrors there are around that we don't notice? If I had to worry about them, I'd have gone paranoid. Not that I didn't end that way, of course. And if I hadn't reflected, I would have been a lot less desirable as an agent," his mouth twisted into an angry grimace, "and they wouldn't have come for me."

"What else is true, and what is false?"

"You can hypnotize people, to a certain extent, but don't rely on it too much. You can make them forget easily that they saw you go in or out of buildings and rooms, and that is enough for most purposes. If you go for their throats and then try to make them forget about it, it will be a lot harder; you'll never know when those suppressed memories will surface again. Just remember, what you want them to forget must be forgettable enough. As for putting people under your power, don't do it until I teach you how to do it right. This is a power that you have to fear a lot. You're actually digging into other people's subconsciouses, and the subconscious is a very murky place. You never know what you may be starting when you do. You think that you're on top of the situation, because you bent someone's will to your own, and before you know it, you're playing Michael Douglas in "Fatal Attraction." I've seen it happen, and trust me, it's not funny when it happens to you."

"Can I turn into a bat?"

"No, but you can vanish. Not that you really need to do it that often. You're a lot stronger, and faster. Which means that you can move too fast to be caught by cameras, and you can, as I say, command people to look the other way, which is as good as being invisible when you need to be. It takes less energy than vanishing, so you might try that."

"What else?"

"Get a home-based job. You won't be sleeping the whole day, so that's a good time to catch up on your reading, or do anything you want to do. And any extra money you make will be welcome, and add to your cover."

"And I'll have to get blood." Vinnie finally worked up the courage to say it.

"There are a couple of slaughterhouses where they're not too curious, if you pay them. Roger will very likely give you the addresses. If you want to avoid questions at all, hunt for rats. You won't believe how easy it is to catch them. And if you have to live in the inner city, you'll find out that if you don't take care of them, they'll take care of you. And medical labs, of course, for human blood."

"And I'll be alone all the time."

"Not so alone." Peter said. "Of course, other vampires will be understandably wary of approaching you, with your background. But you can make new friends. And you will have us, and Roger, who know the whole truth about you. And maybe some of the new friends you make can be trusted with that truth."

"But no contacting Mother, or Amber, or anyone..."

"That's true." Peter said somberly. "Not for a while. Maybe later you can approach Mother. As for Amber, let her lead her own life. Let her mourn you, and go on to other things. The same for everyone else that you worked with. It's safer for you that way."

"In about ten years you can take on the Agency, and if you succeed, then things will change for you," Eric added.

"Just expose it," Peter added. "Let the American people decide what is to be done with it. Eric believes it's past saving and I don't. But that's not for me or him to decide. Once people know what's happening, then they can figure out what to do about it."

"But not until about ten years have passed," Eric put in.

Vinnie shivered again, thinking of how it would be for him. "Ten years seem such a long time."

"But that's how it will have to be."

"If that is the way it's going to be..." Vinnie knew that protesting wouldn't change things. He had to adapt, and learn, and make himself ready.

"Yes, that's just the way it's going to be." Eric said, solemnly. Keep the medal with you. When it tingles in your hand you know we are summoning you. Just stare at it, and you'll be back here.

"Now you have to get back to Roger, and do what is needed there," Peter said.

"Roger...what about him?"

"What can you tell me about him?" Eric interrogated in a cold and professional manner which, Vinnie suspected, he used to cover strong emotion.

"He's in pain. I wish that I could help him not be in such pain."

"You can. That's what you need to do for him," Peter added.

*"I tried to reach him, make him understand that it was all right, that he doesn't need to punish himself for what happened to me," Eric said, emotion seeping into his voice. "But he blocks me out. You have to break that block, so that we can meet face to face again."*

*"I...I think that I can do that."*

*"Good. Then that is your first assignment."*

It changed again. The lighted corridor, Peter and Eric were gone, and he was back in Roger's apartment, staring at the medal and chain in his hand.

He wondered if what he had seen was real, then chided himself for playing such games. Of course, it had happened. He had something to do with Roger, and he had better start on it.

He went to see his friend, who was sitting on his bed, staring ahead.

*"Vinnie, when you leave, don't come back here too often. They may be able to track you from here. I'm not that safe for you. They may figure out that I played host to another vampire, and I want you to be on a wholly different coast when it happens."*

The pain flared in Roger again. He wanted Vinnie gone not so much for his safety, but to keep the painful memories away. He didn't know that Vinnie could offer him something better than that.

Roger saw the expression in his friend's eyes and misinterpreted it. *"It can't be helped, Vinnie. I can't change things for you."*

*"I have to believe that there is a reason for this," Terranova said softly.*

*"You'll have to find some other place to stay. There are plenty of abandoned houses and you can stay in any of them for a while. Here are the addresses of several places where you can get animal blood without many questions. Just don't give me any information as to what you'll do. What I don't know I can't betray. Just be gone, and I'll hope for the best."*

*"If we need to meet again, how will we do it?"*

*"Put an ad in the paper. If you're all right, just sign it..."*

*"Peter Vincent. My brother's name and mine. If I need to meet you, it will be..."*

*"Mel Peters. Use Profitt's name, since we met through him. If I have to contact you I will sign 'Still Crazy after all these years, R.' Loco means crazy, and Lococo is close enough."*

*"Not Buckwheat?"*

*"No. That might be too obvious a clue. But you may use the words 'Buck' or 'Wheat' in your messages. Yes, a combination of 'Buck', 'Wheat', 'Crazy', 'Mel', 'Profit', 'Peter', 'Vincent', or 'New Land' might be enough to start a code. Next time we meet we may change it."*

*"Add 'Eric' to the code. I may sign myself 'Ericson'"*

*"No." Roger shuddered.*

Vinnie looked up to him, calmly, feeling Peter's medal tingle in the palm of his hand.

*"Roger," he said softly, his voice falling into a cadence, "you must forgive yourself for Eric. He's forgiven you, and you must do the same."*

Roger turned his face away.

Vinnie took him by the shoulders, and turned to face him. He took Roger's chin with his hands and made him turn his face, so that he could lock eyes with him.

*"Eric doesn't want you to hurt yourself," he said in a deeper voice.*

*"How can you know what he wants, or would want?" Roger struggled to break out of Vinnie's grip, and out of his encroaching mental influence.*

*"I know." Vinnie didn't know how it worked, but he felt a power leave him and go into Roger. "You must stop blocking Eric. He wants to see you, and talk to you. Don't be afraid. He won't hurt you."*

*"No. It can't be." Roger tried once more to turn his face away, but Vinnie held him firm.*

A light formed at the corner of the room, a light that began to take human shape. *"Eric is here,"* Vinnie said. *"He wants to see you."*

*"No!" Roger protested once more, weakly.*

*"Eric is here," he repeated, staring at the figure in the corner, which was becoming more and more*

recognizable. "Turn around and look at him."

Roger still protested, but Vinnie made him turn around again and marched him to where Eric was waiting for him.

"Why are you afraid of me, Alfalfa?" Eric said to Roger. "I won't hurt you."

Roger fell down to his knees in front of Eric, who put his hands over Roger's shoulders. "Poor Roger, have I hurt you so badly then?"

"Eric.." Roger said, in a whisper. "I didn't know...I didn't realize..." Other words followed, but Vinnie stepped away. He should not eavesdrop on this. It was enough to know that Roger was at last facing his past, and that somehow he was confronting all the hurts that he had received and all those that he had inflicted, all because he had believed too much...

Tears flowed from Roger's eyes. Vinnie had seen Roger cry before, but only bitter tears of regret for what could not be changed. Now, with Eric speaking softly to him, he wept cleansing tears that washed the bitterness away. Whatever Eric was telling Roger, it would allow Roger to heal at last.

*Vinnie, Peter's voice echoed in his brain, this is how you will earn the blood that you will take. And before you do, you must say the prayer of Saint Francis.*

"Lord, make me the instrument of thy peace..."

*Yes, Vinnie, say it. Say all of it, and believe it. You have to believe it each and every time, if you're to believe in yourself."*

Vinnie said the prayer, letting the words seep into his mind, bringing peace to him.

Eric was gone, and only Roger remained, still on his knees, tears streaming down his eyes.

Vinnie helped him up.

Roger opened his eyes and looked at him. "Vinnie, anything you want of me is yours for the asking."

Vinnie let Roger's forehead rest against his chest. He opened Roger's collar and massaged the neck.

"Go ahead, Vinnie," Roger whispered.

He laid Roger on the bed, with his head hanging down. This allowed the vein in the neck to pop up against the skin. Amazed as to how natural it felt, Vinnie pushed his lengthening teeth into the vein and drank. Surprised again as to how little he really needed, he raised his head, wiped the wound in Roger's neck clean, and helped him up again.

"Will you be all right?" he asked him.

"Yeah. I will now. Thanks, Vinnie. And take good care of yourself."

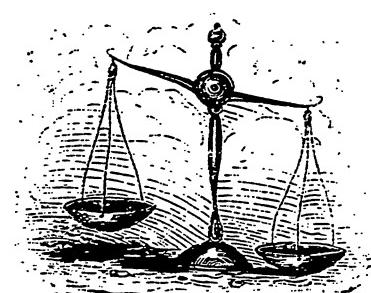
Terranova walked towards the door. This was how it was going to be, for quite a while. He had a long road ahead, and he'd better get started now. He picked up the addresses that Roger had left behind, and turned to him.

"Good-bye, Roger. If you ever need help, call on me."

"Same to you, Buckwheat."

And then he was gone.

- The End -



# *A Thief in the Night,*

*by*

*Adriana I. Peña*

*[This vignette takes place just a few short weeks after "Closing the Wounds."]*

He was stronger, faster, than he used to be. His senses were sharper. It was not true what they said about mirrors, and he could stand the sunlight if he was carrying earth on him.

Vinnie Terranova walked up and down the street, repeating to himself what he had been told, what he had to accustom himself to being...

He needed human blood. He had managed for a while with animal blood, but he knew that it was not enough, that he had to take some human blood before his system began to suffer from the lack of it. The description of what could happen when his body became stressed was reason enough for him not to delay doing it.

A couple of weeks ago he had broken into a medical lab and raided the biohazard bag. He had gotten ten tubes out of it, far more than what he needed for the week, and he had rejoiced in the knowledge that he did not need to do that again for a while.

...He had raided a garbage can for food...

He knew that was what he had done. Just like the derelicts in the street, he had scrounged in the trash, tearing through it with anxious hands, trying to find some food that he could eat...

He had been warned it would be like this, yet he did not dare face the alternative. Not yet. Maybe later, when he could adjust to all the changes that had taken place...

Just a few weeks ago he had been in his apartment, between assignments. He had waited for his boss, Frank McPike, to find what was available, and where he could send his prize undercover operative in the fight against organized crime. He should have enjoyed his vacation, instead of freelancing, as he had done. Because of that he had lost his family, his friends, a place to go to...

He had decided to investigate the activities of Salvadorean death squads. One death squad, with the connivance of the CIA, had come for him, and "disappeared" him. One of those involved had been a vampire, and out of kindness, or cruelty, had given him this chance to cheat the death prepared for him.

Now, walking here, alone, with the hunger clawing at him, thinking of how much he had lost, he wished he could have died there, so that now he wouldn't have to endure what he was enduring. He could hear the heartbeats of those around him, and their breathing. Each heartbeat was filled with the promise of blood that was being pushed through veins and arteries, so much of it in each body, so little that he truly needed...

Yet he could not bear to do it.

If he took their blood he would have to get close to them, have to know them, become involved with them...

He was in the fix he was in because he had become involved with people that he had not known, meddled in what was none of his business. Hadn't he paid enough for that folly? Did he have to pay again and again?

He should stop getting involved with other people's problems, a voice within him kept repeating.

Look what it had gotten him. Look at all the opportunities he had missed because he could not stop caring about others. It had to end.

Hadn't he paid enough? What right had they to force him to do this, to become involved with others? Why should he allow himself to be used again? The way of the world was that you used, or were used, and it was better to be the user, the voice kept repeating within him. Let Peter find another patsy.

He remembered the warm glow that had come over him when he had taken blood from Roger Lococo. It had seemed so simple then. He had even felt happy about it.

But he couldn't do it again.

It hurt too much.

The strangers who passed by were bodies without faces, and he wanted them to stay that way. If he listened to their beating hearts he would forget himself, he would begin to care, and he would hurt again...

He didn't want to hurt any more.

He felt his fists tighten in his pocket, and as he did, there was a tingling sensation in his right palm.

"I can't." he said. "Why don't you leave me alone? Why do you keep urging me on?"

He fought the urge to pull out the medal and stare at it. He knew that when he stared at his brother's medal he would be transported to that other place where Peter waited for him, and with Peter would be Eric, Roger's former partner, who had plans for him...

He didn't want to meet anyone who had plans for him, the voice insisted. He had to get his life, or what passed for it, in some sort of order, not have someone else twist it out of shape to satisfy some plan...

*Despair is a sin.*

"Huh?"

For a moment Vinnie thought he had heard his brother's voice, the voice that Peter had used to preach his sermons in church.

"It's not fair. You can talk to me when I go to your place. But I'm not going, not today. Leave me alone. I don't want to talk to you now."

Vinnie made his hand open, and he let the medal fall into the pocket. He pulled his hand free and turned the palm against his leg.

If he looked at the palm, he might find an imprint of the medal there. And looking at it might be the same as looking at the medal that caused it.

Vinnie Terranova didn't want to meet Peter, for all that he loved his brother. He didn't want to meet Eric, ever again. Eric was just one more of the people who used him as they wished, never mind the cost. A nastier version of Frank McPike...

He shivered. Sooner or later he would forget, sooner or later he would pull out the medal and stare at it. Or he would just look at his palm, and the result would be the same.

He could try losing the medal, but he knew that it would be useless. He had already tried leaving it in the pocket of his other pants, and then, when he had stuck his hands in the pockets, his fingers had found the too-familiar shape.

Hunger was rising in him. He had better get himself to that medical lab soon, before he gave in to the temptation those beating hearts offered; before he did as his brother and Eric wanted him to do.

He was coming closer to the lab when he saw the police at the entrance, and the ambulance with them.

"An attempted hold-up," a passer-by said. "Someone thought they could get drugs in there."

Junkies always thought they could get drugs from medical facilities of any kind. And one of them had chosen the place where Vinnie went for his...his drug of choice.

He had to get some blood on his own now.

He looked around. He wondered if he could lure someone into an alley, take what he needed and be done with it...

If he did that, he made contact with another human being. And once contact was made, Eric and Peter would find a way to take over. He wasn't strong enough to be predatory in the taking...

Someone sleeping. Someone who didn't know what was happening, and who would thus not

become important to him.

He walked away, keeping to the darkened wall. There were people sleeping inside the houses, inside the apartment buildings that he was brushing by as he passed.

An upper story apartment, he thought. People living in the upper floors thought themselves safe from break-ins, and they left their windows unlocked. He couldn't vanish, and he couldn't turn into a bat, but he was strong, and fast... He could climb up the wall, using minute handholds, and find an open window. He could gauge from the breathing patterns if those inside were awake or asleep. With so many apartments and with the side of the building in partial darkness, he would have the time to pick and choose.

So now he was going for breaking and entering... He used to be a cop once. Now he was a robber. He would only steal a small amount of blood that would not be missed and disturb nothing. And he would find other medical labs so that he wasn't so dependent on the one that had just been robbed...

He found the unlocked window on the third floor. He listened and heard breathing, accompanying three beating hearts. Their pattern was steady, at least two of them were. The third was somewhat labored, but still it was a sleeping pattern.

He went into the apartment, and listened again. The breathing didn't change, neither did the heartbeats. He looked around. There was little light coming from the street, but for his transformed eyes it was enough. A young man and a woman on the bed, and a baby on the crib. He frowned. Babies had a habit of waking up and wailing in the middle of the night.

He cast his influence upon the baby, to make sure that it continued to sleep. Perhaps make it so that the baby let his parents sleep all through this night...

He turned to the couple, trying to control the envy that he felt. He would never marry now, never have children...

The woman's hand hung by the side of the bed. He knelt by her side. He had not had much practice in influencing people, but making sure that those who were sleeping remained so was basic. He cast his influence on the husband, lightly, and more strongly on the wife. He squeezed her forearm to make the wrist veins bulge, then bit.

A wave of pleasure enveloped him. He understood what was happening; animal blood could keep him alive, but lacked the trace elements that kept his system balanced. His body had been silently starving for those elements, and now the need was at last being filled. And there was something else, something that he could not define, but that he couldn't find in the medical tubes.

He took what he needed, then released the hand. He wiped the trace of blood from the mother's wrist, and was gratified to see that the bleeding had stopped, leaving behind only a couple of small wounds which would probably not be noticed.

He got up, and went to the window again.

And stopped.

There were only two hearts beating...

He could not have taken so much...

The woman's chest rose and fell in a steady pattern. She was breathing, her heart was steady. So was the man's...

The baby...!

He went to the crib, where the child's face was turning blue.

SIDS, he thought. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Crib death. Perfectly healthy babies stop breathing and die, for no discernible reason at all. And the parents find out too late...

When those two woke up their child would be dead.

It was not too late...The child was breathing when he came in. He took the baby and covered its nose and mouth with his own mouth and blew in, forcing air into the tiny lungs. Two breaths, and he massaged the heart with his fingertips. He gave two more breaths to the baby, and this time the heart started to beat. He kept giving breaths, and soon the baby could breathe on its own.

He put the baby back. It would live. Until the next time that its breath stopped...

Vinnie didn't know what caused crib death, that thief in the night — no one did. But he had heard that babies which were deemed at risk were attached to monitors, so that if they ever stopped breathing,

they could be resuscitated, as he had just done.

He had to get this baby attached to a monitor. He could not let those nice people in the bed wake up to find their child dead.

Sure, call 911, tell them that he was not the father, nor a relative, just the vampire who had snacked on the baby's mom...

But *she* could call. Wake up in the middle of the night, notice that the baby was not breathing, and take it from there.

She would have to breathe into the baby as he had done. Well, she was bound to have heard of it, and there would be nothing remarkable if she tried something that she had never done before to try to save her baby. She only had to think of it.

Vinnie frowned. He had to give her clear directions. Wake up, check on the baby, wake up her husband, and let him call 911, while she put her mouth over the baby's face and breathed into its lungs.

He wished that he had more practice on controlling other people's minds. Well, she was asleep now, and that would make her more receptive.

"You will get up. There is something wrong with your baby. You must check it. Remember what you read about mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It's worth trying. If the heart stops you must push the breastbone with your fingertips several times, up to one third of the body's width..."

He gave her instructions on CPR that were as clear as he could recall. But how much did she grasp? Well, it was the best he could do.

Terranova hoped that it would work. All of this would be guesswork. First, he had to make the baby stop breathing. He took out the medal and squeezed it in his hand. *Let me do this right*, he begged both Peter and Eric. *I haven't done this before, so if you can coach me, do it. Help me help this baby live.*

Suddenly he knew how to slow the baby's heart and breathing. Not enough to kill, but enough to turn its lips blue.

He awoke the woman and stepped back into the shadows, slowing the baby's breathing even more. Let her stumble and accustom her eyes. Then, when she turned towards the crib, he made the breathing come so close to stopping as to be imperceptible.

The woman bent over the baby, and screamed.

Then it all happened. The husband woke up and, trying to keep calm, called 911. And the woman, driven by the need to do *something*, gave the baby mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, even though she had never done it before.

Vinnie kept to the shadows of the next room, trying to figure how to get out. The chance came when the paramedics got there. As the husband went to open the door, he made for the window. The woman gasped, but he used the link he had with her mind to keep her from saying anything. Then he was gone, quickly, so that she was not sure what she had seen.

He stood outside the window, listening to what the paramedics said. Their voices were calm and professional. Yet Vinnie heard a note of relief. Paramedics dreaded SIDS calls, because all they could do was tell the parents that the baby was dead, and that it was not their fault, just a rotten trick that had been played on them. This time, by some miracle, they had arrived in time.

It was done. The baby would live, and Vinnie Terranova, vampire, had paid for the blood he had taken...

Yes, he realized. He *had* paid for it. The mother had not truly agreed with to the payment, but what did it matter? If she had known, he knew she would have gladly given him what he had taken, and more besides. He had not meant to, but it had worked out that way...

*You fool!* the voice inside him said. *You had a chance to get away and blew it!*

Terranova climbed down the wall, and jumped into the darkened street. He had done it, just as Peter had wanted him to. And it felt...it felt *wonderful!*

*Now they have you, as always they had you. You will never be free. You will always be someone's tool! What do you get out of this? And you could have had the world, I could have given it to you!*

"Hello, Sonny." Vinnie said, recognizing at last the voice that had been hammering inside his head. "You still trying to get at me?"

There was a ripple next to him, and then Sonny Steelgrave was facing him. Vinnie smiled sadly at him. Sonny had electrocuted himself rather than face life in prison after finding out that his good friend Vinnie was the undercover cop who had destroyed his criminal empire. He had died unable to understand why someone like Vinnie could turn down all the good things that his good friend Sonny could give him for the sake of abstract words like justice, and to protect those weaker than himself. And Vinnie had not been able to explain it to him.

*Sooner or later you'll see things my way. Just think of what you lost, think of what you could have had. We can still be friends — partners — you and me. And you'll come to me in the end."*

"Maybe you'll win in the end, Sonny. But not today." Vinnie closed his hand on Peter's medal, drawing strength from it. "Begone. What you and I had to say to each other has already been said."

Sonny vanished, and as he did the wind repeated Sonny's words, *You will come to me in the end.*

Vinnie took a deep breath, trying to forget Sonny, concentrating on the memory of the baby, and how it had felt when its tiny heart had begun to beat again.

He had been so willing to give this up, because he had listened to Sonny when he made him think that he didn't want to be hurt again. Sonny had made him feel sorry for himself and made him deny the life around him, and the fact that he was a part of it. He had denied life. He had denied himself hope...

Despair was a sin, and he had given in to it.

\*

The church stood lighted against the surrounding buildings. The brightly colored windows spoke of warmth, of fellowship, of welcome.

Vinnie went in, grateful that all the nonsense about vampires being repulsed by holy symbols was just nonsense. He needed what this place could give him, and he would receive it here...

He found the priest still about and asked him to hear his confession. Kneeling down, he asked the holy father's blessing before he admitted his unwillingness to reach out, his desire to live by himself, for himself alone. He didn't offer details of what his circumstances were, only that he had it in his power to help others, and that he had denied it, because he didn't want to get involved. Then he confessed that he had had the chance to help one child, and that the child's need had shamed him out of his selfish behavior. "It was then that I knew that I had to come see you," he said to the priest.

Vinnie felt a sense of peace wash over him, and for the first time in a very long while, he had hope for the future.

- The End -



## *Fitting In*

*by*

*Margaret L. Carter*

*[Note: This should be considered an alternate universe tale; the main line of "Vanishing Breed" stories deals with Star Trek: TNG a bit differently from "Fitting In."]*

Clouds drifted across a full moon in the deep blue twilight sky. The fragrance of ancient pine trees perfumed the air. Thorkeld spread his wings and glided on the cool wind. His nostrils flared, questing for the scent of live prey, while his infrared vision scanned the forest for the crimson aura of—

*Damn, this just isn't working!* Ensign Thorkeld banked toward the ground and sailed to a halt in a clearing he had programmed into the wooded landscape. A stream rippled through it. Kneeling, he splashed icy water on his face. It felt real enough to his skin, just as the holodeck "vegetation" smelled real. But his inhuman senses told him that the "sky" was only a computer construct veiling the metal overhead, and he couldn't ignore the absence of a planetary magnetic field. Relaxing his psi focus, he allowed his wings to melt into his flesh, leaving the appearance of an ordinary lean, tall, dark-haired, young adult humanoid male. Ordinary except for the red glow in his eyes, but he didn't care about that when nobody was around to comment on it. When among other crew members, he avoided dark or shadowed spaces; others' imperfectly hidden reactions to that glow made his spine itch.

The short flight hadn't worked off nearly enough tension. Maybe a good run would help. From past experience, he knew that on the ground he could more easily accept the holodeck's illusion of wilderness. He sprang to his feet and set off at a brisk trot. Within a couple of minutes, he glimpsed the silhouette of a buck racing between the trees ahead. Since he'd programmed the deer, it came as no surprise. He had to admit that its sound and scent registered as authentic. No aura, though. He hadn't figured out how to make the computer simulate that feature of a live animal.

Thorkeld increased his speed to match the deer's. Seconds later, he pounced on it and bore it to the ground. Razor-sharp incisors slashed the buck's throat. Blood welled up. Thorkeld pressed his mouth to the wound for a token taste. He knew there was no point in drinking any deeper, for holodeck blood lacked flavor, not to mention substance.

With a sigh, he released the buck and stood up. "Computer, end program." The forest vanished, replaced by the neutral grid. Thorkeld scrambled into his off-duty coveralls and exited the holodeck. *Dark Lady, how I miss walking on a real planet!*

He hadn't anticipated how much that aspect of serving on a starship would affect him. He'd spent all his life on planets, first growing up in the vampires' Tyrberg colony on Mars, then on Earth at Starfleet Academy. Not that he regretted his career choice, not for a microsecond! Few enough of his people weathered the stress of Academy life all the way to commissioning. Thorkeld felt doubly fortunate in being assigned to the *Enterprise*, flagship of the fleet, commanded by a Captain already as legendary in his own time as James T. Kirk of an earlier *Enterprise*. Still, in the two months since reporting aboard, Thorkeld had stepped off the ship only once, at a space station, and he was feeling the strain. *I will not blow it, Lady of Darkness, don't let me blow it!*

He quickened his pace to his quarters. One luxury of a Galaxy-class starship, even a lowly Ensign got a stateroom to himself. *Not that anybody would want to room with me — they all think I'd rip out their throats while they slept!* Well, by no means all, he had to admit, but he'd felt the barely-suppressed fear from more than a few crewmates. After a brief sonic shower — he missed water showers, too, but everybody shared that complaint — he hurried into a fresh uniform and headed for Ten-Forward. He had an appointment to play chess with Ensign TLar before starting his shift.

The Vulcan female already waited at their usual corner table when he arrived. Like Thorkeld, she wore the blue of the Science Department. So far, she was the closest he had to a friend on board. He'd noticed the odd looks they received, for it did seem strange that a coldly logical Vulcan and a member of Thorkeld's emotionally volatile race would choose each other's company. Thorkeld, however, found TLar's personality relaxing. Unlike these undisciplined ephemerals all around them, she had the mental control to shield her emotions — and he believed Vulcans did have emotions, although carefully regulated. With her, he didn't have to block out constant torrents of turbulent feeling. He could get a rest from the curiosity/fear/fascination that emanated from so many of his shipmates. Furthermore, her copper-based blood didn't tempt his appetite.

TLar nodded a greeting and indicated the three-dimensional chessboard, already set up on the table. Beside it sat two glasses of the mineral water they both favored. Thorkeld slipped into his chair. "Sorry I'm a little late. Lost track of time on the holodeck."

"Or perhaps you wanted to postpone your inevitable defeat?" She spoke with the smooth absence of expression characteristic of her people, yet a trace of humor leaked from behind her mental shield.

One of the surprises she had given him was the revelation that Vulcans could make jokes. Smiling, he answered, "Overconfidence can be deadly, so watch out!"

As they played, his peripheral consciousness picked up people leaving and arriving, the new arrivals always choosing to sit several tables away from Thorkeld and TLar. When a crewman walked in with a civilian woman Thorkeld hadn't seen before, doubtless a family member, Thorkeld's acute hearing caught a whispered explanation: "That's the vampire."

His people disliked the superstitious associations of that word, though they'd used it themselves, by default, for centuries. Upon declaring their existence openly, a few generations back, they had tried to establish a substitute term, with no permanent success. Even "nightstalker," which wasn't much less ominous but at least had no historically negative resonance, hadn't caught on. The only alternative was to demystify the word "vampire" as much as possible. Officially, they had achieved that goal. By now everybody knew they were simply another species, not undead creatures animated by the Devil. But the ephemerals' instinctive dread of beings that craved their blood was not so easily nullified.

Thorkeld struggled to shut out the psychic miasma and concentrate on the game. *I have as much right to sit in this lounge as any other officer. I won't let them drive me out!* And in fairness, the others didn't know what they were doing. Non-empaths had no concept of how they projected their emotions.

Between moves, he and TLar discussed their work. They had a break in routine to anticipate, since the following day the *Enterprise* would call at a research station — on an honest-to-Goddess natural world — to check on the scientists in residence and pick up a variety of biological specimens the team had collected. A humble task for a Galaxy-class ship, but since the *Enterprise* was scheduled to put in at Starbase Nine within a few weeks anyway, she had been detailed to transport the specimens.

"What do you think of our chances to draw an hour or two planetside?" he said to the Vulcan.

TLar answered his tone rather than the words. "You find the restrictions of shipboard life difficult, don't you?"

"Does it show that much?" He felt ashamed of disturbing her with his feelings.

"Not at all. You control very well. However, by now I am familiar with your reactions." She moved her third bishop one level up.

Thorkeld glowered at the board. *Why didn't I see that coming?* A surge of unpleasant emotion, emanating from someone who'd just entered the bar, shredded his concentration. He looked up. *Oh, damn, it's Kelsey.*

Ensign Erin Kelsey was a petite, blonde ephemeral — a Terran — who'd served on the *Enterprise*

almost a year. Though she belonged to Engineering, their paths had crossed several times, not amicably. In fact, at their first meeting they'd shared a computer training session under the tutelage of Commander Data. Kelsey, who wore her sternly professional demeanor like armor against any man who dared take her less than seriously because of her size and cuteness, had made some minor error. Without thinking, Thorkeld had leaped in to correct her. *I wanted to impress the Commander, sure, but I wanted to impress her, too! Pretty dense, thinking I could win points by topping her in front of our peers and the Science Officer, to boot!* After his years at the Academy, he should know better than to flaunt his superior memory and calculating skills. After all, the ephemerals couldn't help being slow.

Since that first meeting, his relationship with Kelsey had slid downhill. Too bad, for she was cute, with that pixie haircut. Though visual attraction wasn't a primary stimulus for his kind, Thorkeld had acquired enough of human aesthetic standards to find her attractive. She clearly didn't return the sentiment, since she didn't miss a chance to extrude her figurative claws at him. Now, walking into Ten-Forward with another young officer, she said loudly, "I keep wondering how a couple of telepaths can play chess without cheating." Her companion responded with an appreciative laugh.

T'Lar wouldn't accept the pretense that the comment wasn't directed at her and Thorkeld. Looking over her shoulder at Kelsey, she said, "Surely you know that neither of us is 'telepathic' in the sense you mean." Both Vulcans and vampires sensed emotions; as for literal "mind-reading," Vulcans were touch-telepaths only, while vampires required a blood-bond to read thoughts.

"Yeah, maybe, but I still don't want to get too close. I wouldn't take any chances of a vampire guessing what I'm thinking."

Thorkeld hardly had to guess; he couldn't miss her thorny surface. He tightened his shield, not tempted to probe any deeper into her emotions. He didn't breathe freely until she and her friend withdrew to the far end of the lounge, out of empathetic range.

T'Lar said in a voice too low for nearby human listeners to catch, "Try not to let such comments distress you. We Vulcans are accustomed to these reactions from the mind-blind. Most of the remarks stem from insecurity."

"I know that," he said, "but I don't know if I'll ever get used to it." A Starfleet career had attracted him partly because, among so many species of aliens, a near-immortal creature of the night could be accepted as just another alien, more nearly human than most. But he hadn't reckoned with the residue of centuries of legend. Officially, Starfleet taught universal tolerance, the ideal of IDIC; unofficially, individuals still reacted to the "vampire" image. Life at the Academy hadn't been this difficult. Several of his cousins had gone through the course with him, so he hadn't faced the ephemerals alone, and the Earthside location provided an occasional escape from the confines of the school. A starship, though, was a closed environment, and Thorkeld was the only one of his kind aboard.

The encounter with Kelsey spoiled his concentration, causing him to lose another game to T'Lar. *If I ever need a hole knocked in my arrogance over my "superhuman" intelligence, he thought, I can always trust a Vulcan to supply it!*

They separated, she to off-duty pursuits, he to his usual evening watch. He preferred duty hours during the ship's "afternoon" and "night," in order to sleep during the "day," a choice that won him gratitude, even if not friendship, from the other Science Department junior officers. Before starting his shift, he made his customary stop at Sickbay.

Dr. Crusher was prepared for him, tricorder at the ready and a half-liter of blood warmed to human body temperature. Whole blood, too complex for economical production by the replicators, was stocked from supplies grown *in vitro*. It had a bland, generic taste — not to mention the lack of vitality from contact with a living human mind — but, on the other hand, it was issued to him in a daily ration with no effort on his part.

The moment he entered the private examining room set aside for him, Dr. Crusher began her tricorder sweep. "How are you feeling this afternoon, Mr. Thorkeld?" She casually touched his shoulder as she worked. The Chief Medical Officer's matter-of-fact behavior toward him came as a welcome relief from the ill-concealed nervousness of most of the crew.

He shrugged. "The same, I guess."

"Well, your vital signs appear normal," she said, "but I can't say the same for your morale. Care to talk about it?" She linked the tricorder to a computer terminal to download the data on his current condition. Since so few of his people served in Starfleet, voluminous and detailed information was needed to evaluate the effects of space travel on their physiology.

"It's the usual reaction from other crew members," he said, "combined with adjustment to off-planet living. I can handle it."

The scent of warm blood permeated the air. His mouth watered as he watched Dr. Crusher pour the liquid into a mug, which she handed to him. "Your daily dosage could be adjusted, if necessary."

He sipped from the mug, forcing himself not to gulp. "This is adequate." Another few cc's of lifeless blood wouldn't make any difference.

The doctor sat down opposite him. "What about your donor schedule? How are you getting along with that?"

No vampire could maintain optimal health without frequent feedings on sentient prey, for Thorkeld's kind were psychic as well as physical predators. Recognizing the necessity, Starfleet had made arrangements for each vampire who served aboard a ship. Once every six days, Thorkeld fed on a volunteer, either Starfleet or civilian, who received a bonus for the donation. He didn't know the exact amount and had never asked; he didn't really want to know how much people had to be paid before they would put up with his "monstrous" appetite. After a brief internal debate, he decided to answer the Medical Officer's question honestly. "One night in six isn't really enough, but I can function all right."

"Since Starfleet and your people's Council of Elders agreed on this schedule," she said, "I'd hesitate to change it arbitrarily. Particularly considering that if you got transferred to a new duty station after becoming used to a higher frequency, you might have a serious adjustment problem in cutting back."

He nodded. "Don't worry, I can manage." With the heat of the blood spreading through his body, he felt more optimistic than he had a few minutes before.

"Don't try to be superhuman — even if you are," she added with a smile. "If the strain gets too great, I can probably arrange for supplementary donations. As for that other morale problem, have you talked to Counselor Troi?"

He had considered and dismissed that idea several times already. "Getting along with fellow officers is my own responsibility. I don't see any reason to take up her time."

He felt Dr. Crusher's skepticism. "Think about it. Remember, that's what she's here for."

One reason he didn't want to get too close to a sensitive empath such as the Counselor was his fear of what she would read in him. She couldn't miss the never-quite-satisfied blood-need that would certainly awaken at contact with her glowing vitality. Ashamed of his imperfect self-control, he didn't want to go out of his way to flaunt it.

When he'd finished his liquid meal, he set aside the empty mug and prepared to leave. The doctor said, "Your donor appointment is scheduled for the usual time tomorrow evening. Don't hesitate to tell me if you have any problems. That's what *I'm* here for, too."

He parted from her with insincere thanks. Sure, medical communications were confidential, as were sessions with a Counselor. He still didn't want to court a reputation as a malcontent.

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The following afternoon, the *Enterprise* settled into orbit around the uninhabited planet where the Science Department was scheduled to take on a selection of botanical and zoological specimens. To the general disappointment, the world was not cleared for shore leave, so only essential personnel would transport down. Therefore, Thorkeld was especially pleased when he and TLar were summoned to a briefing by Commander Data. They'd been chosen to accompany the Science Officer and Dr. Crusher on the brief stopover.

"Glamorous life of a Starfleet officer, eh?" Thorkeld remarked to TLar as they left the briefing. "I know the Commander picked us because this mission is utterly safe and routine, but I'm still delighted. Anything to get off the ship, even for an hour." *Fresh air and open sky!* he mentally exulted. *Solid*

*ground underfoot!* The only drawback was that their visit would occur during the research team's daylight hours, but he wasn't complaining.

When the four of them stood on the transport pad a short time later, Thorkeld wore standard-issue polarized goggles. As a further precaution, the doctor had prescribed a sunscreen for exposed skin. He didn't expect to suffer much discomfort, since this was a chilly world with a weakly shining primary compared to Terra's sun. Only a narrow strip of the mountainous land mass was habitable by Terrans without protective gear. The briefing had compared the locale to Earth's Rocky Mountains.

The head of the science team, a tall, white-haired Black named Dr. Malcolm, met them outside the largest of the prefab dwellings. "Good to see some new faces," he said. "Hope you've got time for a cup of tea."

Thorkeld gratefully waited for Commander Data to handle the social amenities. He needed those minutes to recover from the sensory onslaught that followed materialization. His head reeling, he barely managed to stay upright. *Steady*, he ordered himself. *It's a magnetic field, fundamentally no different from Earth's. Down is under my feet, the sky is up, and north is that way.* When the vertigo faded and his vision cleared, he flared his nostrils to absorb the fragrances of the landscape — brisk mountain air, trees that weren't exactly pines, moist soil, the spicy aroma of a nearby fern-like plant. At the limit of his range, the rustle and odor of some kind of small animal teased his senses.

As they all walked into the shelter, Dr. Crusher whispered, "Are you all right, Ensign?"

"Of course, I was just disoriented for a minute."

Commander Data accepted refreshments on behalf of the group. Thorkeld sipped the mint-flavored tea in silence, letting others do the talking while he scanned the room and their hosts. The research team consisted of eight scientists, six human, two Vulcan. One human female, with dark hair, olive skin, and lustrous dark eyes, cast sidelong glances at Thorkeld. He felt her curiosity, knew she recognized his inhuman nature. (If the others did, they were indifferent to the fact.) He sensed that if he had a few hours to spend with her, he would find her receptive to his allure. The Academy had spoiled him with a wide selection of willing partners, far more satisfying than paid donors. He shook off the fantasy. *Keep your mind on the job!*

He drew the task of coordinating the transport of supplies from the ship to the planet's surface, while Commander Data interviewed the scientists and TLar helped a couple of Dr. Malcolm's assistants prepare the plant and animal samples for transport. Meanwhile, Dr. Crusher examined the members of the research team, treating two for mild anemia. Thorkeld savored the mountain air, growing chillier as the sun sank below the highest peak. If only he could stay until full dark and run free in the forest, hunt on the rocky slopes. Another impossible fantasy. *Anyway, this planet's wildlife might not even be compatible with my metabolism.*

As the caged animals were brought out, Dr. Malcolm displayed a few of their peculiarities. "This world doesn't seem to have evolved birds," he said. "Gliding and flying mammals fill that niche. Like this one, a sort of diurnal bat." The creature he indicated was covered with smooth hair, wings and all, instead of a Terran bat's leathery hide. "And here's something quite unusual that we collected only day before yesterday. Found a cluster of them hibernating in a cave." He showed them a sphere of glossy, deep blue fur. "It's remained continuously dormant since we picked it up. Even moving it into the lab didn't wake it."

"It resembles a tribble," Commander Data observed.

"Yes, interesting case of parallel evolution, isn't it?" Dr. Malcolm said.

Shortly the away team was ready to beam up. Thorkeld took his position with some regret. When he materialized on the transporter pad, his head spun with the reverse of his reaction upon beaming down. The sudden absence of the planet's magnetic field shattered his equilibrium all over again. He drew slow, deep breaths, trying to keep his companions from noticing his distress. *Damn, isn't this ever going to get any easier?*

Exposure to a natural environment, plus the strain of meeting new people, had whetted his appetite. Somehow he managed to perform his duties adequately, until his watch ended and he was free to meet his volunteer donor in Sickbay. He didn't know whether to hope for a man or a woman. With

male donors, he missed the sexual polarity that enhanced his feeding. On the other hand, drinking from a woman tormented him with the awareness that he couldn't act on that attraction. No more than he could use his vampiric allure on any member of the crew — any hint of abnormal influence would confirm their worst fears about him. He had to wait until someone made at least tentative advances toward him, something that hadn't happened yet.

This time, Dr. Crusher introduced him to a young woman, an Engineering lieutenant he hadn't met before, though he recognized her from passing glimpses. She sat on the edge of the bed in an empty cubicle, eyeing him with less nervousness than most of his donors. She had brown eyes, close-cropped brown hair, and a solid, athletic build. Like all Starfleet personnel, she was healthy and, one had to assume, intelligent.

"Well, Mr. Thorkeld, tell me what I'm supposed to do." She fingered the collar of her uniform blouse.

"Please, just Thorkeld." Like Vulcans, many of his people used only one name as first and last, now that they had no need to maintain a facade of humanity. He sat on the bed, not too close to the woman. "I'll drink from your wrist."

"Oh, I see." Her mild anxiety faded further. It was still enough to scrape on his nerves but not enough to dull his appetite. She rolled up her left sleeve. "Dr. Crusher assured me this would be painless, but I'd like to hear it from you."

"It doesn't hurt. We secrete a mild anesthetic." *Dark Lady, I could make this so much better than merely "painless"!* He yearned to show her the pleasure he could give. But any such attempt would expose him to charges of sexual harassment.

She extended her arm, which trembled slightly when he wrapped his fingers around her wrist. He gently licked the soft skin to give the anesthetic time to work. The caress evoked a shiver from her. He forced himself to resist the temptation to deeper intimacy. His razor-sharp incisors opened a minute wound.

The intoxication of her body heat, her heart's rhythm, and her rich blood swept over him. Of emotional contact, though, he felt only curiosity and relief. The beginnings of passion stirred beneath her calm surface, but she suppressed them before they floated to full consciousness. Though he knew the encounter had to go this way, he thirsted for more. Instead, he wove a dreamlike serenity to calm the woman's residual misgivings.

When he withdrew, she stared at the tiny incision for a second, before sealing it with the spray Dr. Crusher had left for that purpose. "You were right, it didn't hurt a bit." She stood up, smiling. "Now I can tell my friends it's not what they think."

*So that was her motive, curiosity.* Thorkeld strove to silence his illogical disappointment. He decided not to ask what her friends thought "it" was like.

\*

"This creature has changed position," TLar said, drawing Thorkeld's attention to the dark blue furball in its force cage. The science lab had responsibility for animal specimens, while the plants had been consigned to the ship's hydroponic "farm."

"You're right. So it's not completely dormant. What do you think caused it to move?"

TLar took a tricorder reading. "No appreciable change in the organism's metabolic rate. I doubt that it moved by conscious intention — if something with such a rudimentary brain can be said to have intentions. I suspect a tropism."

"Reasonable. To what?"

TLar swept her tricorder around the area. "There's a minute but measurable heat difference on this side of the room, emanating from that computer terminal. Perhaps the furball gravitates toward warmth."

Commander Data, who had just entered the lab, walked over to stare at the creature. "A logical inference. If so, it is extremely sensitive to small temperature gradients."

Thorkeld found the android's presence restful, for Data had no emotions to broadcast. Thorkeld did have trouble, though, getting used to a sentient being with no aura. He said, "The furball doesn't have limbs. It must undulate like a tribble."

"And equally simple in other ways," TLar said. "Eyeless, earless, dependent on odor and possibly taste."

Thorkeld added, "As far as we've discovered to this point, it seems to be all digestion and reproduction."

"Hence the extended dormancy," said the android officer, "conserving energy for the rigors of a harsh ecosystem. But unlike a tribble, this animal cannot be omnivorous. Readings on its internal anatomy indicate that it requires a simple, restricted diet."

"What, though?" said Thorkeld. "Malcolm's report didn't specify."

TLar said, "Doubtless the creature's hibernation prevented him from finding out. We must wait until its dormant phase ends."

Which might not happen until after the furball was offloaded at Starbase Nine, but meanwhile it provided a minor puzzle to enliven shipboard routine.

Thorkeld soon had a less pleasant quandary to deal with. That very evening, while collecting his ration of blood in Sickbay, he noticed one of the assistant medical officers treating a crewman for mild anemia. He thought nothing of it until a few days later, when rumors of unexplained illness began spreading. The inexplicable anemic condition wasn't serious, easily remedied and causing no loss of work-hours. Still, by the time five people showed symptoms, whispers pervaded the ship. Thorkeld sensed critical stares whenever he ventured outside his cabin. Illogical, of course, for people to connect him with a blood disorder that probably had an ordinary, straightforward disease etiology, yet some did make that connection, if only on the level of idle speculation. By the fifth day, no one but TLar, Data, and Dr. Crusher would so much as speak to him outside the line of duty.

That afternoon he reported for his standard ration. This time, it was Ensign Erin Kelsey who was just leaving one of the examination cubicles. She halted to whirl around and glare at Thorkeld. "Dr. Crusher, why aren't you looking for the solution to this little epidemic where it really is?"

The Medical Officer's voice turned icy. "I don't know what you're referring to. And anemia hardly falls under an engineer's expertise, does it?"

"I know who's draining my blood — and everybody else's," she hissed. She pointed to Thorkeld. "Why are you letting him get away with it?"

His own pulse pounded in his ears. *Even she can't really believe that!*

The doctor's calm didn't flicker. "I don't have time for groundless accusations. Have you in fact seen Ensign Thorkeld attack you, or anyone else?"

The petite blonde shook her head vigorously, more in protest than negation. "I don't have to! Who else could it possibly be? You medics have already determined it's not a microorganism, right?"

Thorkeld leaped toward her and grabbed her shoulders. Kelsey threw up her hands in defense. "Get away from me, you monster!"

He instantly let go and sprang back. "I didn't intend to hurt you." *I just wanted to shake some sense into the girl!*

His apology came too late. Before either of them caught their breath, a Security officer stepped into Sickbay, followed by Commander Riker. *Oh, damn, now I'm really in trouble!* Thorkeld knew that display of nonexistent self-control would fuel the rumors about his predatory habits. He turned to the First Officer, spreading his hands in surrender. "I'm all right now, Sir. I just lost my temper for a second."

"That may be," said Commander Riker, "but you're still being confined to quarters until the Captain has time to speak to you."

The Security man placed a hand on his holstered phaser. Thorkeld started toward the corridor, to avoid the indignity of having a weapon drawn upon him.

Dr. Crusher interrupted, "Mr. Thorkeld was about to have his meal. Starfleet regulations don't prescribe starvation as a punishment for an unproven crime."

Commander Riker said, "Fair enough, you can deliver it to his cabin."

Thorkeld nodded acknowledgment for her gesture, though his stomach churned with rage and anxiety. As he was guided from the room, he kept his eyes on Kelsey, who glowered after him, radiating turmoil equal to his own.

\*

Half an hour later, Thorkeld presented himself in the Captain's ready room, where, in addition, the First Officer and Counselor Troi faced him. He'd barely spoken to Captain Picard since reporting aboard. In this situation, Thorkeld's superior strength, eidetic memory, and potentially immortal lifespan gave him no comfort. He couldn't take refuge in the dismissal, "They're just ephemerals." Human or not, Picard was the *Captain*.

The Captain stood up, making that automatic adjustment to his tunic that Thorkeld had already noticed as a characteristic gesture. "Ensign, I won't insult you or waste our time by dragging this out. I'm asking directly: Have you attacked anyone during your time aboard the *Enterprise*?"

Thorkeld stood at attention, started to meet the Captain's eyes, then decided that act might be considered an attempt at hypnotism. "No, Sir, I have not. On my honor as a Starfleet officer."

Picard sat down. "Well, Counselor Troi?"

The Betazoid officer gazed at Thorkeld with the serene compassion she always projected when on duty. "He believes he's telling the truth."

"Believes—!" Thorkeld choked down his anger. Another outburst wouldn't help his case.

"Isn't it true," she said, "that one of your species, if deprived of proper sustenance for too long, can suffer a mental breakdown? We have to consider the possibility that you performed these acts in an abnormal psychological state that you don't remember."

He was shaking his head before she finished. "Yes, deprivation can cause...madness. But I'm nowhere near that condition. And the behavior would be obvious — violent, not subtle." The Captain and First Officer projected — not quite skepticism, but suspended judgment. Defensively, Thorkeld added, "You can check the medical background to confirm that."

Captain Picard rose. "Very well, Ensign, I believe you." Thorkeld sensed a subtext of "provisionally." "Dismissed."

Practically shaking with the effort of shielding his indignation from the Counselor, Thorkeld walked out. Once out of her range, he relaxed his mental control and quickened his pace. He headed for Ten-Forward, bitterly aware of the passers-by who drew away from him while trying not to be obvious about the aversion.

In the lounge he ordered a brandy. Synthehol had even less effect on his inhuman metabolism than the real thing did, but he hoped it might provide a distraction if nothing else. The air seemed to crackle with the negative response of other off-duty personnel who noticed his entry. Crowds always made him uncomfortable, with their chaotic swirl of emotions. Now, surrounded by a constant subvocal buzz of speculation, he found the company of people in groups a positive torment.

He'd begun to doubt the wisdom of seeking a Starfleet career. Could he ever hope to fit in? Did his kind belong in the ephemerals' culture at all? *We're solitary predators, not herd animals. And we're superior to them! Maybe the old ways were better, the ancient predator-prey balance.* Many of the day folk seemed determined to see it that way, regardless of lip service to IDIC.

T'Lar found him there, gazing into his barely-tasted drink. He didn't look up when she slipped into the chair next to him. "I believe in your innocence, Thorkeld," she said.

He didn't need to ask how she knew about Kelsey's accusation. A Vulcan's sharp ears could hardly miss news that must have swept the ship already. "Thanks," he muttered in a tone that implied the opposite. He didn't care enough to shield his negative mood from her.

"It would be illogical," she said, "for you to risk your career for such a frivolous motive."

"Counselor Troi suggested I'd gone mad from thirst and attacked victims in some kind of amnesiac state."

"Unlikely," T'Lar said. "I've seen no evidence of psychological disintegration in you, and I do

not believe you are emotionally unstable enough for that, anyway. My personal experience of your character is a datum to be considered as legitimate evidence."

He sampled the brandy again. *Vile stuff!* He pushed the glass away. "Not that it could matter to you. You're safe — you *know* I'd never try to bite you." He stood up and stalked out of the lounge.

\*

On their next shared watch in the lab, Thorkeld apologized to TLar for his hostile remark. Her cool Vulcan response was a refreshing contrast to the awkwardness a human colleague would have displayed. "The cause was sufficient," and no more needed to be said (even if her answer implied a politely unvoiced clause, "sufficient for a hotheaded nocturnal predator").

A few minutes later she said, "Have you done a comparative study of the tricorder readings on the furball's metabolism?" The staff still called it that, since it wouldn't be assigned a tentative xenological classification until examined by the zoologists at Starbase Nine.

"Can't say that I have," he admitted. "Did you find something peculiar?"

"See for yourself." She displayed the figures on the computer screen. "There's a consistent change over time."

"Yes, its basal metabolism rate is gradually increasing." He stepped over to the force cage to study the furry blue sphere. "That could indicate an approaching end to the dormancy period. Because of the stimulus of being moved to a new environment? Or could something else be involved?"

"Thorkeld, I recall that Dr. Crusher treated two members of the research team that collected this creature—"

"For anemia." His heart quickened with excitement. "Similar to the affliction that didn't appear on the *Enterprise* until after we picked up these beasties. But, TLar, it sounds wildly improbable — this creature has been caged ever since we brought it aboard."

"We mustn't neglect any possibility. Let's discuss the hypothesis with Commander Data." She tapped her communicator badge and called the Science Officer's name.

A few minutes later, the android joined them to examine the cumulative readings on the furball. "Your observation on the creature's increased metabolic activity is valid," he said. "However, its confinement makes it extremely unlikely that this animal could affect the crew in any way. It has neither the intelligence nor the manipulative organs to interfere with the mechanism of the force cage."

"If there's the slightest chance --" said Thorkeld.

TLar said, "Sir, might we set a watch in the lab tonight, with recording devices in place? We have no information about the creature's nocturnal activities, if any."

Commander Data gave his permission. Though he projected no emotions and had no aura, Thorkeld perceived the android's skepticism about the idea.

\*

That night after the evening shift ended, Thorkeld and TLar set up their apparatus in the lab. They'd have a permanent record to support their testimony, in case anything happened.

They settled in a shadowed corner, watching the furball's cage. The after-hours lighting, though adequate for human vision to distinguish details, was dim enough to feel restful to Thorkeld's nocturnal eyes. Like Vulcans, vampires felt no need to fill silence with social chitchat. The two of them waited without speaking.

Thorkeld, however, wished he shared TLar's endless patience. She lapsed into a quasi-meditative state, while he sneaked constant glances at the chronometer to confirm what his innate time sense told him. *Is it going to be a complete waste? Are we chasing the proverbial wild waterfowl?*

Approximately two hours and forty minutes after they began their vigil, the door to the passageway sighed open. A woman dressed in a loose robe stepped inside.

Thorkeld hissed in surprise when he recognized her. Ensign Erin Kelsey! Why was she

wandering the ship in her nightclothes? For a second he expected her to greet him with one of her hostile comments. Then he realized she didn't see him. Her glazed, unblinking eyes demonstrated her condition.

"Sleepwalking," he whispered to TLar. He could have spoken aloud, he suspected, without waking the somnambulist. He and TLar quietly stood up, waiting to see what Kelsey would do.

The petite blonde headed straight for the furball's cage and deactivated the force screen. Thorkeld clamped down on his impulse to stop her. He said to TLar in a low voice, "It must be luring her with some kind of telepathic emanations."

The Vulcan replied in the same muted tone, "Tribbles are said to exercise an almost hypnotically soothing effect on humans who touch them. Perhaps this creature has a similar but stronger ability."

Sure enough, Kelsey was stroking the furball. She leaned against the table in a pose of languid relaxation. Her aura, even in this entranced state, evidenced sensual pleasure.

The animal didn't try to escape from the cage. Instead, it uncurled from its spherical resting position. The mouth, concealed under blue fur, opened to extrude a whip-like tongue. The tip probed Kelsey's forearm and fastened there.

"I've seen enough," said Thorkeld. He strode to the table and put an arm around the young woman's shoulders. With his right hand, he lightly pinched the animal's extended tongue. As he'd hoped, the stimulus startled the creature into withdrawing, leaving a bead of blood on Kelsey's skin. The air tingled with the fragrance.

Thorkeld swayed with dizziness. For an instant he forgot TLar's presence in his longing to press his mouth to the tiny wound. He closed his eyes and held his breath. *Have you lost your mind? Do you want the crew to know you're exactly what they think, or worse?*

His fingers found the minute puncture and applied pressure to stop the bleeding. *No wonder they've gone unnoticed; it's almost invisible, even to me.* He became aware of TLar beside him, reactivating the force cage and calling for Commander Data. Thorkeld gently shook Kelsey. "Wake up."

She blinked. Awareness stirred in her eyes. The moment she recognized him, she twisted free of his loose grasp. "What am I doing here? You! I knew it!"

The injustice of the charge stunned him into silence. TLar filled the gap. "You are quite mistaken, Ensign Kelsey. This animal — the furball, as we call it — lured you here, exercising some kind of psychic attraction. Clearly, it feeds on iron-based blood, puncturing the skin with a hollow, dart-tipped tongue."

Kelsey stared from the Vulcan to Thorkeld. "I don't believe it." The protest lacked conviction.

"The audio-visual record," said TLar, "will confirm my statement. Ensign Thorkeld behaved with absolute propriety in preventing the animal from harming you any further."

Kelsey gazed at the floor, blushing.

Before either of them could say anything else, Commander Data entered. TLar told him the details of the incident.

"I congratulate you on the accuracy of your...`hunch.'" TLar looked slightly dubious at being credited with such a "human" accomplishment. Data continued, "Dr. Crusher will doubtless be pleased to learn the cause of the anemic episodes. Prevention will be simply a matter of locking the animal in a room coded to admit only the three of us." He turned to Kelsey. "Perhaps you had better report to Sickbay, Ensign."

Blushing still hotter, she said, "Yes, Sir. Uh...may Ensign Thorkeld escort me?"

Astonished at the request, Thorkeld hardly knew what he was doing until they were halfway to the turbolift. Avoiding his eyes, she began, "Mr. Thorkeld—"

"Please, just Thorkeld. That's what my friends call me." He couldn't suppress a twinge of bitterness. "Not that I have many on the *Enterprise*."

"Partly my fault," she said. They stepped into the turbolift. "I owe you an apology."

"No need to say any more about it." Did this gesture mean she might begin to view him as a friend? The thought of more than friendship set his heart racing. He had to be careful not to presume on her timid advance.

"But I have to." Her voice quivered with obvious embarrassment. "Gods, this is hard to say. I

had a reason for behaving so irrationally -- I imagined you were trying to...influence...me." She swallowed audibly.

"Oh? Why?"

"Because I felt...attracted...to you, and I couldn't admit it might be natural." She raised her eyes to his. "I guess it was."

Again he felt lightheaded. "May I call you Erin?"

Nodding, she offered him her hand. He clasped it and bestowed a light kiss on her fingertips. The radiance of her aura enfolded him.

- The End -

[Margaret L. Carter's *Vanishing Breed* tale, "Voice from the Void" is just out in **THE TIME OF THE VAMPIRE**, edited by P.N. Elrod and Martin Grenberg, available from DAW books.]



*[Editor's note: The author's introduction to "Like a Shepherd" and THE X-FILES follows. However, I know little about the series, and had no trouble following the story and immensely enjoying it, with no added explanation whatsoever. I would suggest that you read the story purely for the fun of it, and then come back here if you have any questions.]*

THE X-FILES airs on Friday nights at 9 pm on FOX. The two main characters are FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. Scully was trained as a doctor (she did her residency in forensic medicine), but was recruited by the FBI. She is a good logical agent, with her feet (usually) on solid ground. This is a big part of the reason for her current assignment — she's supposed to keep an eye on Mulder, try to keep the bureau advised if he should go completely insane. Fox Mulder — nicknamed "Spooky" at the Academy — is a UFO enthusiast. He's seen a lot of weird things over the years, starting with the abduction by aliens of his sister when he was a child. (He tells Dana of his sister in "Conduit," which concerns the UFO abduction of somebody else's sister — this one eventually is returned, however.) He is almost always open to believing the "unbelievable" rather than the "reasonable" explanation for something weird, and so, when his abilities had won him the right to choose his assignment at the Bureau, he chose the X-files. The X-Files in the series are files kept by the FBI on unsolved (maybe unsolvable) crimes, especially those which seem to have some sort of really strange features, like UFO involvement or the supernatural. Are there "real" X-files? Nobody knows. There is also a mysterious figure in a dark suit — "Deep Throat" -- who occasionally gives Mulder a hint or a warning.

The episode that I had in mind when writing this story was called "Fallen Angel." Deep Throat tips off Mulder that the "toxic material spill" which is causing the evacuation of Townsend, Wisconsin (pop. 12,000) is really a UFO crash. Mulder goes to the site with no authorization, sneaks around, and is captured by members of a large US military presence in the area.

While in the brig Mulder meets Max, a member of a UFO-enthusiast group called NICAP, who has also been picked up trying to get a peek at the crash site. In the morning Scully comes to take Mulder back to Washington. She has been told that the reason for all the secrecy and soldiers is that there's a crashed Libyan fighter jet, and they're trying to get the nukes disarmed.

Meanwhile, the survivor of the UFO crash, a near-invisible figure which can move extremely fast and has already killed a deputy and three firemen with its bright-flash-of-light weapon, escapes from the military's perimeter.

Scully takes Mulder back to his motel to get his things. There they find Max, who takes them to his trailer and tells them more of what he's found out about the alien crash. Max has a lot of electronic listening equipment, and he picked up and recorded the last radio message of the late deputy.

Mulder and Scully go to see the officer's widow, who has already been intimidated by the military, and then go to the local hospital where her husband's body (burned beyond recognition) was first taken. They are still at the hospital when several soldiers are brought in; they have failed in their attempts to "search and destroy" the alien, and are pretty much burned beyond recognition themselves, although not all of them are dead yet.

Scully stays at the hospital to help out. Mulder goes back to Max's trailer, where he finds the young man having an epileptic seizure. Mulder notices a strange scar behind Max's ear -- a scar he's seen before in the X-Files, on people who've been abducted by UFO's.

When Scully gets back from the hospital in the morning, she agrees with Mulder that there's some sort of cover-up going on, but warns him that Max's medication indicates he may be delusional. Meanwhile the satellite radar tracking station has noticed another craft ("sorry sir, meteor") hovering over Townsend.

Scully and Mulder return to Max's trailer to find only a few spots of blood on his pillow. They hear a report of an unauthorized trespass at the waterfront over his listening equipment. On the way they find two more burned-up men, and Max — terrified that the aliens are going to get him.

Then the alien (who shows up on the military infra-red scopes) rushes up, flings Mulder violently up into the air, and grabs Max. Mulder picks himself up, only to find Max, convulsing, suspended in mid-air in a big blue beam of light. As Mulder stares in shock, Max vanishes. The military bursts in and arrests Mulder. The Office of Professional Responsibility Hearing back at FBI Headquarters the next day decides to throw Mulder out of the FBI, but Deep Throat later gets them to keep Mulder on. I think this was meant to be the end of the series if FOX hadn't picked it up for more episodes, because without that last little scene it would have made a fairly neat conclusion.

## *Like a Shepherd*

*by*

*Lisa Payne*

*[Editor's note: I have barely watched an entire episode of "The X-Files," and know very little about it — but this story really appealed to me. Somehow, the author has captured in a quintessential nutshell the answer to that little fantasy of ours as to what would happen if Nicholas Knight, Toronto detective and vampire, encountered Scully and Mulder, investigators of the unknown and uncatalogued. "Like a Shepherd" originally appeared on the fkfic-l e-mail list. It is reprinted here with the author's permission.]*

"Nicolah! You look terrible!" Janette cried as she opened the door. Nick Knight walked into her elegant apartment and sank into a darkly tasteful armchair. His normally immaculate hair and clothes were spotted with dirt, leaves, and some foul-smelling gore. Although the sun would not rise for almost an hour, his hair and skin seemed singed. Janette handed him the glass she had been drinking, and he tossed the contents back in one swallow.

"What happened to you?" Janette demanded.

"It's a long story," the detective replied.

"C'mon, Nat, UFO's?" Knight's tone was highly skeptical.

"C'mon, Nick, vampires?" she mocked him. "There are more things in heaven and earth, and all that. Besides, there's been a lot of reputable witnesses, and no one has any other explanation for all these disappearances."

The two were in Nat's office, which she was usually too busy to use. The clutter testified that she was always too busy to tidy it. "Business" was slow, and they were at liberty to chat about mysteries outside the responsibility of the Toronto Police Department. There had been a rash of unexplained disappearances up around Lake Simcoe in the past week. A few of the missing persons had known each other, but most had nothing in common. "Lights in the sky" had been seen, and rumors were flying that government radar had seen something. Nick decided to keep the ludicrous argument going, just to keep the doctor from noticing that he hadn't touched his tea.

"I know all about things 'undreamt-of in your philosophy,' Nat. I've been around a long time. But I've never, in all my years, run across any little green men!"

Don Schanke walked in without knocking, as usual. His face and hands were heavily stained with green. Natalie took one look and burst out laughing, causing Nick to look around and grin.

"Don't even ask, okay? Myra was dying a dress, and — I don't even want to go into it. Just don't ask." Schanke flopped down into Nat's remaining chair.

"Can we laugh?" Nick asked drily.

Schanke tried to change the subject. "Don't you guys have any work to do?"

Natalie started busily searching through a precarious pile of dusty papers from the corner of her desk. "I'm cleaning my office," she volunteered.

Schanke turned to Knight and tried to glare at him. "What about you, hotshot? Shouldn't you be out investigating a murder or something?"

Nick gave him an innocent look. "Sorry, Schank. There's just nobody dead."

\*

Fox Mulder sat quietly in his cramped basement office. He had a fresh newspaper clipping on the desk in front of him, but he wasn't seeing the print. He was remembering a young man, a misfit, an epileptic — and a promise that Mulder had failed to keep. He whipped around at a sudden voice in the doorway.

"Quitting time, partner. Aren't you going home?" Dana Scully's calm gray eyes took in Mulder's jumpiness and the pain in his face. Although his leg had healed, he still seemed hurt, somehow, by the recent escapade that had almost ended his career. She was glad the Bureau had decided to keep him on — he was the most skillful detective she had ever worked with. But when she saw him looking like this, she couldn't help but wonder whether it might not be better, for Mulder's own sake, to try to get him reassigned away from the X-files.

Mulder tossed her the newspaper. "Take a look at that," he suggested.

Scully read the story. "Lake Simcoe. Ontario, Canada? Mulder," she warned, "that is out of our jurisdiction."

Mulder wheeled his chair around and got a folder out of his desk drawer. He handed it to Scully as she sat down in his spare chair, and pointed at the newsprint as she began to read. "Look at this. Three of these missing persons are members of NICAP."

"Mulder," Scully began, "don't get into that again. You know Max was a delusional..."

"And look here." Mulder turned over the papers in the folder until he found the one he wanted. "This small article here. They're treating this as unrelated — a camping accident, or an arson."

"Body of a man...charred beyond recognition...authorities seeking any identification...Lake Simcoe," Scully read. She looked up at her partner. "It's still not in our jurisdiction, Mulder. And it could all be a coincidence."

"I've got two weeks' vacation coming." He looked at her. "So do you."

\*

Somewhat to Scully's surprise, she found herself and Mulder on their way to Canada only two days later. There had been no trouble about getting time off — her supervisor seemed to think it would be a good idea for "Spooky" Mulder to take a vacation, and for Scully to keep an eye on him. She was fleetingly a little angry at the nursemaid reputation she seemed to be developing, but shrugged it off before the supervisor had finished signing the vacation requests.

"Mulder's car looks awfully normal," she thought as she tossed her luggage into the back and walked around to the passenger door. "What did you expect," she asked herself. "A hearse? The Batmobile?" She got into the car.

Mulder handed her the map as she strapped herself in. "You all set?" he asked.

"Just fine," she replied. They got underway. A few miles later, Scully found herself wondering about the electronic device secured just below Mulder's glove compartment. It had two rows of LED's across the front, a couple of big clunky knobs, and a speaker grille. It looked obsolete. "What is this?" she asked the driver.

"That's my old police scanner," Mulder told her. "I've never gotten around to taking it out of the car. It's way behind the state of the art, but it still works. Pretty much."

"I'll take your word for it," she said, but he reached over to turn the device on anyway. It made a terrible noise, and he automatically adjusted the Squelch until the static was barely audible.

"My uncle used one of those things all the time," Mulder volunteered. "He was a reporter."

"You had an uncle who was a reporter?"

"Yeah. He worked all over. Las Vegas, Seattle, Chicago. All over."

"Your uncle ever work in Ontario, Canada?"

"No." There was silence for a while. Then suddenly Mulder said, "I wonder about the human race, Scully."

Dana looked at him, but he looked all right. "What do you mean, Mulder?"

"Well," he began, but then he had to avoid a truck. When the car was going steadily again he started over again. "We've encountered some very strange people — you could call them human mutations — that pyrokinetic Cecil Lively, and the liver-eating Eugene Tooms. Even the Jersey Devil."

Scully wondered where he was going with this. "What about them?"

"Are you familiar with the Gaia theory of the earth?"

"Isn't that the idea that the earth is all one organism?" Scully asked.

"And that it compensates for change, trying to keep itself in balance somehow. I've been an FBI agent for years, Scully. And I've been paying attention to UFO's and paranormal activity all my life. Almost." His voice sank to a whisper on the last word, and she knew he was remembering his sister's long-ago abduction. Mulder coughed once and went on. "I've never before run into these human — monsters. It's like the human race is trying to evolve something more — dangerous. Maybe to compete? To hold our own against the aliens in our midst?"

"You think creatures like Tooms and Lively are coming about so as to protect the human race from alien invaders?" The disbelief in Scully's voice was palpable.

"I don't know, Scully. It's just a thought."

"To protect us," Scully repeated flatly. "Too bad they're all psychopaths."

\*

"Well, somebody's dead now," Schanke told Nick as he slapped the dispatch slip down on the vampire's desk. "Charred beyond recognition," he went on, "and it's all ours. God, I love this job."

Nick winced at his partner's choice of words, and read the location off the slip. "That's the north edge of town," he mused. He tried, but couldn't remember why the words "charred beyond recognition" rang a little bell in his mind. "Let's roll, partner."

Natalie was already at the site when they arrived. An early-evening jogger had discovered the body and called it in. The uniformed cops who had been the first police on the scene had cordoned off the area, but a man and a woman in a dark car with Washington, D.C. plates had apparently gotten there even before the police, and were poking around in a way that irritated Nick. "Who the hell are these people?" he demanded. "What are they doing here?"

Dr. Lambert was right next to him, leaning over the body. "They're FBI agents, on vacation, if you can believe that. I think they're slumming." She looked at the body again, and said, "That's funny."

Nick looked where she was looking, and saw what she saw. "The body is badly burned, but the vegetation near it isn't scorched at all." He scouted around the body with his practiced hunter's eyes, and added, "The victim came here under his own power. The tracks are those of a single man, and not someone carrying a heavy burden — an already-charred body, for instance. He came along here, and then stopped here for a little while — confused? — and then fell over dead. Charred beyond recognition."

The smell of the burnt human flesh was making him sick, and the words "charred beyond recognition" kept nagging at him. There was some other smell, too, that he just couldn't place. He tried to sample the air without sniffing too obviously, but before he could identify the weird aroma, Don Schanke came back from interviewing the jogger and introduced the FBI agents to him.

"Nick!" Schanke began. "Hey, Nick, this is Fox Mulder and Dana Scully from the FBI..."

"Aren't you a little out of your jurisdiction?" Nick snarled. "This isn't an FBI matter."

"We're on vacation," Dana replied smoothly. "We happened to hear the call..."

"Have you connected this with the similar incident at Lake Simcoe last week?" Mulder interrupted.

"That was it!" Knight thought. "That was what I kept trying to remember!" He told the FBI man, "Lake Simcoe isn't in FBI jurisdiction either."

But Mulder wasn't listening to him. His attention had been caught by a call coming in over the police radio in the uniformed officer's squad car. "Scully," he said, and he had gone a little paler even

than usual. "Did you hear that call?"

"It was just a report of illegal fireworks, Mulder," she tried to calm him down.

"Lights in the sky, Scully, lights in the sky." He was already turning back to his car. "I bet there's another corpse just like this one in King's College Circle, wherever that is. A nice, fresh corpse."

Nick Knight grabbed the FBI man's shoulder and spun him back around. "Are you withholding evidence in an arson, Agent Mulder?" He turned his head towards Schanke and the patrolmen and snapped, "Did anyone actually check an ID on these two?"

Dana Scully wordlessly produced hers as Don placated his partner, "Yeah, Nick, I saw their ID's — both of them. Looked all right to me. But I would like to know what's going on here." This last was addressed to Fox Mulder, who had gotten his shoulder back, slightly dented, from Knight's grip, and was displaying his ID card to the vampire.

"If I told you all that I think is going on here, Detective Schanke," Mulder said, "you wouldn't believe me."

Dana knew that that had never stopped him before, and so she hastened to put an end to the conversation before Mulder told the Toronto detectives all about his theories of alien invasion. "Look," she said reasonably, "We know we're way out of our jurisdiction here, and we're on vacation anyway. But Mulder and I did run across some similar deaths and injuries in Wisconsin a while ago, and while it wasn't a case we solved..." It hadn't even been a case they should have been allowed to know anything about, but the chances of Canadian police being able to hold that against them were, she hoped, small.

Natalie Lambert was suddenly in the midst of the conversation. "Did you say injuries?" she demanded. "You mean there were people who were burned like this — and survived?"

Scully forced down the more graphic memories of that night in the Townsend Hospital ER and nodded.

"And the weapon that did it looked like a flash of bright light, according to witnesses who saw the attacks from a great enough distance," Mulder put in. "I'd say the killer is, or was, in King's College Circle, and that the 'fireworks' that were reported are the flash effect associated with another killing. If you want to catch up with this killer you should probably go there now. And you should take us with you."

\*

In the enormous back seat of the Toronto detective's classic Cadillac, Fox Mulder checked his gun. Scully looked at him curiously. "Do you really think that will do any good?" she asked him in a whisper. "The military in Townsend were armed to the teeth, but it didn't help them."

"The things are invisible, or nearly so," Mulder murmured. "Why would they need to be invisible if they were also immune to bullets?" Scully couldn't answer that, so she got out her own gun and checked it over.

Nick Knight, driving the car, heard the quiet conversation and the smooth metallic clicking in the back seat, but he was fairly sure that his mortal companions had missed it. Nat Lambert had insisted that she come along on the grounds that a doctor might be needed, and she was riding between Nick and Don in the front seat of the Caddy. Her warmth and soft human fragrance were distracting, but not distracting enough to keep Nick from worrying what sort of invisible killer they might be going up against. He wondered whether his passengers might be merely insane, but realized that would be the "sensible" reaction if they had come up with a story about vampires, and withheld his judgment. "Check your gun, would ya Schank?" he said, and Nat stared at him in surprise.

\*

The University of Toronto looked deserted at this late hour of a summer's night. Nick checked his pistol as he got out of the car, then curled his lip in disgust. There was that unidentifiable smell again, stronger and more disturbing than it had been when overlaid with the stench of crisped human flesh. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck. The mortals didn't seem to notice anything.

Suddenly a scream rang out from past the oak trees that surrounded the King's College Circle common. Mulder, who had been heading that direction already, broke into a run, staggering a little on his recently healed leg. The others followed. "No!" the unseen voice cried out, "Don't take me!"

Mulder broke through the trees and saw just what he was afraid he'd see. A skinny, uncoordinated-looking young man was suspended in mid-air, in the midst of what looked like a wide beam of blue light. The man was obviously shaking in terror, but no sounds could be heard from him anymore. His grubby sweatshirt had the letters NICAP stencilled across the chest. "Not this time!" Mulder shouted, and sprang for the young man's feet.

Knight and Schanke came thundering into view just in time to see the resulting explosion. Schanke was blown off his feet, hit his head on a tree root, and lost consciousness. Nick narrowed his eyes and flew at the blue column of light, suddenly much expanded in size, which held its two victims suspended above the turf. The light, when he reached it, burned like morning, but he was strong enough to throw both Mulder and the young stranger to the ground outside its influence. Teeth bared and eyes blazing, he wrenched himself free from the beam's stinging grip, and it disappeared.

The doctors were already bent over the fallen figure when Nick had cooled down enough to land. "This man's dead," Nat announced. "Looks like maybe a brain embolism." Despite her cool tones, Nick knew her heartbeat sounded afraid.

"What about Schanke?" he asked her.

"He hit his head, might have a concussion," she answered. "Agent Mulder isn't breathing." She gestured to where Scully was giving him mouth-to-mouth. Nick noticed that, oddly enough, Scully's heartbeat was quite normal. He allowed himself to hope that she hadn't noticed him flying.

Without warning, Nick's eyes went yellow and his teeth extended. Nat looked at him in alarm. "Did you hear that?" he breathed. Even as she shook her head, he realized the vibration he had heard, and which spoke to him so much of danger, was well outside the range of human hearing. Suddenly, with his vampiric eyesight, he saw two shapes moving where there had been nothing before. He drew his gun, and told Nat to get down. She obeyed, and he was able to concentrate on seeing the shapes. He was dimly conscious of Nat spelling Scully's resuscitation attempts some distance behind him, but ahead of him the mysterious shapes were moving in an erratic pattern that made them hard to aim at. First one would make a quick dash in some direction, then the other. They seemed to stop only long enough to change directions, and he could not tell from observation which direction they would choose next. They were incredibly fast over short distances, faster than any living thing he had ever seen, and the trick would be to shoot at one while it was stopped, and before the two could attack the party in some sort of a pincer movement. He fired, twice in quick succession, and was rewarded with an unearthly wail. The surviving creature sped at him,

and he sprang straight up into the air, barely in time to avoid its rush. The place where he had been standing was flooded with an incredibly bright light. Nick jammed his eyes shut, and gasped in pain and sudden fear. If the creature got a square shot at him with that flash of light, it could well mean the True Death.

When Nick got his eyes open again, it took him a second to locate the alien. Even as he got his eyes focussed again, the thing sped towards Natalie and the other two humans. Without thinking, the vampire dived at the creature, matching inhuman speed against inhuman speed. He knocked it to the ground, and found himself contending with a strength that matched, or maybe even overmatched, his own. "Shoot!" he growled at Scully, who was on her feet with her weapon out.

Scully hesitated. She still could not actually see the alien. It looked to her as if the glowing-eyed detective were rolling around on the ground by himself in a heat haze.

"Shoot!" the vampire howled again.

"Go ahead, shoot!" called Nat, who had finally gotten Mulder breathing on his own again.

Gritting her teeth, Scully tried to empty her gun into the nearly invisible mass the detective was wrestling with, but knew she must have hit him as well.

Everything went still.

"Good going, Dana," she told herself, "you've killed a Toronto cop."

Fox Mulder opened his eyes just in time to see Nick Knight — fanged, yellow-eyed, and covered with ichor — struggle out from under the dead alien (which bore a perfect image of the vampire from neck to knees upon its back, as well as the image of the ground on which it had died). The carcass began to dissolve into a foul, corrosive smoke, and the vampire heaved it away from him with his superhuman strength.

Nick calmed his eyes, pulled his teeth in, and turned to Dana Scully. She met his gaze squarely. "You don't believe I'm a vampire," he said persuasively.

"Of course I don't believe you're a vampire," Scully replied. She holstered her gun and knelt beside her partner on the grass. "Are you okay, Mulder?" she asked.

\*

Nat had gone to the car to call for an ambulance, and Scully had gone with her. The three wounded men were alone for a moment. Nick had already satisfied himself that Don Schanke would be all right, and now he was carefully probing the blisters forming on his face and wondering how badly burned he was under his clothes.

"You're a vampire?" Mulder asked hoarsely.

Nick doubted human ears could have heard the voice. He looked Mulder straight in the eyes and said sincerely, "You don't believe I'm a vampire."

Mulder half-smiled. "I do now." He closed his eyes and went on. "Don't worry; nobody ever believes anything I tell them."

"That must be disappointing," Nick deadpanned.

"How long have you been a vampire?"

"About eight hundred years now," Nick admitted.

"You ever meet anything like these before?" Mulder asked.

Nick shuddered slightly. "Never in all my life. Never anything like them."

Mulder opened his eyes and spoke earnestly to the vampire. "I have. And I think their activities are increasing. What I've never seen before is a human able to beat them."

"I'm not human. Not any more."

"But your self-interest runs with ours, doesn't it?" Mulder's voice grew even fainter, as he seemed to be drifting off to sleep. "Like a shepherd."

\*

*"What could he mean, Nicolah, like a shepherd?" Janette had found some salve somewhere, and was rubbing it onto Nick's burned skin. It felt delicious.*

*"I'm not sure." Nick opened his eyes and sat up. "A shepherd may eat mutton, but he also drives away the wolves. But it doesn't really matter what the man meant. Those things I met last night are definitely dangerous to us. You can see the burns I've got, and they missed me! You should talk to the others in our community and warn them about these creatures."*

*"Aliens from another world? No one will believe me. I'm not sure I believe you, chérie." But Nick could hear the little current of fear under Janette's silky, skeptical tone.*

*"I don't pretend to know where they're from. All I can say is I had never seen or smelled anything like them before, not in eight hundred years. But it would be mortally foolish to ignore a threat like this. Even if nothing ever comes of it." Nick sounded serious.*

*Janette did not. "But I thought you wanted to be mortal, Nicolah." She laughed. "Lie down again and let me dress your wounds, as fair lady's duty to bold knight."*

*"You're no lady," Nick growled at her, but he was laughing too.*

\*

"So you didn't see any of it. Not the glowing yellow eyes or the half-inch fangs — none of it, huh Scully?" Mulder asked.

"I already told you, no. And neither did you." Scully was driving this time, since Mulder's hands were burned and still bandaged, and the hospital had diagnosed a mild concussion.

"How come he was able to see those things well enough to shoot them, and to survive fighting with one, and survive you shooting that one while he was all tangled up with it? The military in the Wisconsin case sure weren't able to do any of that," Mulder persisted.

"I admit he has phenomenal night-vision," Dana said calmly. "Dr. Lambert told me he suffers from extreme photosensitivity, to the extent that he can only work night shift."

"See?"

"Mulder, the world is full of people who work nights and have good vision. That doesn't mean they're vampires."

Mulder fell silent for a few minutes. Then he laughed.

Scully sent him a quick smile, then turned her attention back to the road. "Share the joke?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," Mulder replied. "I just suddenly feel a little bit better about the fate of the human race."

- The End -



## *To Be a Vampire*

*by*

*Robin M. White*

[Editor's note: This story is based upon the original *Nick Knight*, starring Rick Springfield. The coroner, Jack, filled basically the same role as Natalie does in *Forever Knight*, except without the romance. ☺ ]

"I'm here, Jack. What's so important that you call me down here when I'm on vacation?" Det. Nick Knight asked as he lounged in the doorway of the coroner's office.

"Oh, nothing much. Just a corpse re-animating," he drawled.

Nick smiled crookedly, his eyebrows shooting up. "What?"

Jack led him to a small room and opened the door slightly. Nick looked in and saw a young woman huddled in the corner, shaking.

"She's a vampire." Nick looked from her to Jack, the surprise evident in his voice and on his face.

Jack sighed, and ran a hand through his hair, "That's what I suspected, and why I called you. You're the only vampire I know. What should we do?"

Nick frowned, "I'm not sure. I've never dealt with a new vampire before."

"Really?"

Nick nodded absently, his mind already whirling. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"The wagon brought her in about thirty minutes ago. They said she was found in an alley — a Jane Doe. I opened the bag, and thought what a shame. She was so young and quite a beauty. Anyway," he continued at Nick's impatient look, "suddenly, she bolted upright, screaming. It's a good thing I'm far off the beaten track, or I would have had a heck of a time explaining why there was a screaming woman in my office. Then I tried to calm her, but she seemed terrified of me. She ran into the bathroom and has been in there since."

"I suppose I'll go in."

"Be careful. I went in and tried to talk to her, and she clawed my arm." Jack lifted his sleeve revealing several long scratches.

Nick nodded, and gingerly pushed the door open. She glanced over at him, and retreated farther into the corner, her soft, dewy brown eyes wild. "Easy," he said soothingly as he slowly approached her. She whimpered, drawing her knees to her chest, and angled her body away from him as he squatted down beside her.

"I promise I won't hurt you," he said sincerely while staring deeply into her eyes, carefully extending his hand to touch the long red curls of her hair. She yelped, twisting her head away.

Nick looked at the ragged wound on her neck, his eyes narrowing. He raked a hand through his hair, and sighed. His mouth set in a grim line, he reached over and pulled her into his arms, holding her there despite her struggles, and the keening sounds she produced. As he continued whispering soothing words, she began to relax in his arms.

Nick easily lifted her, and inhaled raggedly as she molded her body to his. "How am I supposed

to get her out of here without being noticed?" he asked as he carried her out of Jack's office.

"The back staircase? And if anyone asks, surely you can come up with a reasonable explanation as to why you're carrying a beautiful woman." Jack stared at Nick smirking.

Nick rolled his eyes, shifting her slightly. "You're a big help."

"I do try. What are you going to do?"

"Take her home with me, and then... I guess, play it by ear."

"I wish you luck. And especially her."

"I heard that."

\*

Nick stood staring at the woman who was lying on his bed. It had been a very long time...too long. He shook his head, and abruptly turned away. *Think of something else, Knight.* He stalked around his apartment, looking at various artifacts, and then picked up an archeology journal. He settled into his favorite chair, and began to read an article on the discovery of more ancient Mayan ruins. His eyes skimmed the words, but his mind refused to process them.

Nick sighed, throwing the magazine down as his gaze went back to her. She was wounded. She was alone. She was frightened. She was extremely desirable. And Nick was a man as well as a vampire.

He moved to sit on the bed beside her and lightly caressed her cheek. He smiled when she murmured contently, and turned toward him. His smile vanished when he again saw the hideous wounds on her throat. He tenderly touched them, wincing when she grimaced and inhaled deeply. They would take time to heal, since she was so new, and he wasn't *about* to let her kill.

Nick got up and went to the bathroom, returning a few moments later with some gauze and medication. Good thing Jack insisted he keep this stuff around. He paused, and then went to his refrigerator and retrieved a bottle. She would probably wake up when he cleaned the ragged gash.

He sat beside her, lifted her hair, and then smoothed some of the salve on her neck. She cried out, and awakened, looking around. Her eyes widened, and she backed away from Nick and started to jump off the bed. "Oh, no you don't," Nick said as he grasped her leg. She screamed, and kicked at him, hitting him squarely in the chest. He fell backward, and landed on the floor with a thud. Her vampire strength was telling. He jumped up and grabbed her just as she got to the door.

He half-pulled, half-carried her back to the bed, and forcibly sat her down. He reached for the bottle, uncorked it, and put it to her mouth. She grabbed it, greedily drinking over half, allowing Nick to finish bandaging her neck.

She handed the bottle back to him, shyly smiling, and licking her lips. Nick followed the movement, noticing the droplets of blood that remained on her mouth. He leaned in, eyes closing, and...then jerked back to gently clean her with a towel. "Why don't you lie down?" he huskily suggested.

She nodded, and then settled against his pillows, yawning. In a few moments, Nick could see the steady rise and fall of her chest.

He removed her shoes, and his eyes followed the slit in her dress all the way up to mid thigh where a garter held her stockings. He stared for a moment, and then shrugged and unhooked the garter, his breath growing rapid as he slid the sheer stocking down her long leg. He slowly repeated the motion with the other leg. He had forgotten how exciting it was to undress a woman.

Knight gazed at the tight, red dress molded to her body, and convinced himself that he would be doing her a favor if he removed it. Surely it couldn't be comfortable to sleep when your circulation was being impeded. He located the zipper at the back and slid it down, trying desperately to ignore the rasping sound. The silky material glided off her shoulders, and she wiggled to help it fall off. He swallowed convulsively as it fell around her waist, exposing her breasts. Of course she couldn't wear a bra with that dress. He tore his gaze away, and completely removed the dress, not noticing the red wisp of lace that served as underwear as he removed the satiny garter belt. He turned away from the bed, eyes closed, twisting the dress, before dropping it to the floor. Detective Nicholas Knight marched to the bathroom for his first cold shower in a very long time.

\*

She was floating in that hazy world between dream and reality, unwilling to completely awaken yet. She stretched and rolled over, snuggling against a warm, solid... She awakened completely, but kept her eyes screwed tightly closed as her hand continued its exploration. Yes, it was definitely a man. She groaned, pushing her long, unruly hair out of her face, ignoring her throbbing head. Then she swallowed once, and reluctantly opened one eye.

Not believing what she saw, she quickly opened the other one, and then smiled at her bedmate. He was not bad, not bad at all. She snuggled into his embrace, nestling her leg between his, and wrapping her arm around his chest. She deeply inhaled his scent, sighed, and then drifted back to sleep.

\*

Nick awoke, acutely aware of the warm female body curled against him. He absently stroked his hand along her side, enjoying the sensation of a woman's flesh against his. She responded by drawing her nails lightly across his chest, and then whispering, "Good...morning?"

Nick released her and sat up. He perched on the edge of the bed, pulling on his jeans, before turning to face her. She was reclining on one elbow, smiling, the sheet demurely around her chest. "It would be good night, actually," he said after clearing his throat.

"I hope I didn't miss work..." she said, and then frowned, her look of amusement being replaced by uncertainty and then fear.

"Who are you?" she asked shakily.

"Det. Nick Knight, LAPD Homicide."

"A cop?" and then under her breath, "Great, I picked up a cop. Cops aren't my type. Are they?" Nick grinned. "You didn't pick me up."

Her eyes snapped back to him, "You picked me up? I don't mean to insult you, but I don't remember... Maybe I should go," she said as she jumped out of bed, barely able to hold the sheet with her shaking hands.

"Look. We didn't sleep together. Not the way you're thinking," he added as her glance shifted from him to the bed to him.

"I suppose you often let almost naked women sleep in your bed, but not 'sleep' with them?" She couldn't quite keep the tremor out of her voice.

"No. We need to talk. What's your name?"

"You don't even know my name?" she spun around, but not before he saw the tears.

He walked to her, turned her around, and said gently, "What's wrong?"

She clutched his arms, "I don't remember anything. I don't know who I am, or what I do. Nothing!" She began to sob, then fell into his arms.

He held her close, murmuring reassuring words into her hair, while his mind raced. He hadn't forgotten everything when he had been brought over, but then again, he had not been tossed into an alley. What could he do? Nick had no idea of how to help her. Maybe talking with Jack would help.

"Why don't you get cleaned up? There are some things you need to know before we go see a friend."

She nodded, and silently walked to the bathroom. "I don't have any clothes." She paused at the door.

"I'll get you some. The dress you had on isn't very practical."

While she was in the shower, Nick rummaged through his closet and managed to find some sweatpants and a sweater. With clothes in hand, he slipped into the bathroom, pausing to listen to the water cascade over her body, imagining the droplets glistening on her smooth, satiny skin. He abruptly dropped the clothes and stomped out, away from her tempting presence.

A little while later, she stepped out, and spun around. "How do I look?"

Nick smiled at her attempt at humor. "Great," he replied, taking in the baggy sweats, and too-big

sweater that couldn't conceal very feminine curves.

She sat beside him on the couch, and timidly took his hand. "What did you want to tell me?"

Nick licked his lips, and looked away, and then stood and asked, "Would you like a drink?"

"Please, tell me," she pleaded.

Nick sighed, and retrieved another bottle from the fridge, pouring some of the red liquid into his ceremonial cup. The cup that could be his salvation if he could only locate a mate. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved." She sounded somewhat surprised.

He handed her the cup and she sniffed the contents, pulling back, "Yuck. That's blood!"

Nick nodded.

"Surely, you don't expect me to drink this? I'm not a freaking vampire."

He merely looked at her steadily.

She laughed, and then said, "You *are* crazy. You're trying to tell me that I am a creature of the night."

"Yes. Drink it."

Again the fear entered her eyes as she glanced at the ornate goblet, that same fear shimmering in her tears. She slowly brought the cup to her lips, her eyes locked with his. She cautiously sipped the liquid, and shuddered, her eyes closing as she gulped the rest of it down. She leaned against the sofa, her chest heaving. She looked up at Nick, her eyes unnaturally bright, and whispered, "What happened to me?"

Nick sat beside her and gathered her close, rocking her gently as she cried. At least he had made the conscious choice to become what he was. She had not had that luxury. His jaw clenched as he thought of the monster that would feed off someone and then just toss them out.

He heard her sniffling and leaned back to ask, "Are you all right?"

She pulled away from his embrace, and wrapped her arms around her knees, as she glanced around his apartment. "Just wonderful. I don't know who am I. I'm sitting in a complete stranger's apartment. And apparently I have been turned into a vampire," she said, her voice cracking.

She stood, and paced, "Who did this to me? And why am I here? And how can a cop afford some of the things you have?" she asked as she examined a very old vase, "And most importantly, why do you keep blood around?"

"That's obvious, isn't it?"

She laughed, shaking her head, "Great. A vampire cop." Then she retreated a step, her hand going to the damp bandage on her throat, "Did you do this to me?" she demanded.

"No. I don't feed from people anymore."

"What was I drinking?"

"Cow blood."

She paled, and sank down onto the sofa, "Cow blood?" she repeated weakly, "I think I'm going to be sick."

"You'll be fine." As Nick stared at her profile, he glimpsed the emotions flickering across her features that finally settled into grim acceptance, then determination.

She looked back at him and asked, "So, are you going to teach me to be a vampire?"

Nick slowly grinned, and took her hand, nodding, "I'm going to try." *And hope that I do a better job than my teacher*, he thought.

\*

Yo, Jack. Are you busy?"

Jack glanced up from the file he was reading. "Not at all. It's been a very slow night. Come on in, Nick."

"You, too," Nick cajoled the young woman, who reluctantly entered the office. She looked around, pausing to tremulously smile at Jack. She glanced back at Nick. "I was here last night. I was on that table in a body bag. God, I was *dead!*"

Jack got her a glass of water, as Nick sat her in a chair. "Are you all right?"

She took the water with trembling fingers, and slowly sipped it. "I guess so. And I'm sorry about scratching your arm, doctor," she said to Jack.

Jack grinned and replied, "That's okay." He held out his hand and introduced himself. "Name's Jack. I'm pleased to meet you."

She grasped his hand, and said, "Jane Doe."

"We were hoping you might have some idea of why she can't remember anything."

"Complete amnesia?"

"Yes. So what do you think?"

Jack looked at her, frowning. "In trauma cases, the person usually only forgets the threatening event, not their entire lives. Of course, I don't know that much about vampirism."

"I thought he was helping you become mortal again, Nick," she said as she glanced between the two men.

"I am, but I'm just playing it by ear. And I have certainly never dealt with a neophyte vampire."

She laughed. "Great. Neither of the only two people that can help me know anything about new vampires. I guess we'll have to wing it."

"Maybe we can reverse it," Jack mused.

"How?" she questioned, "Holy water, crosses, and exorcism?"

"Have you drunk?"

"Yes. Cow blood. And you know the funny part? I'm a vegetarian."

Jack grinned at the irony, and then said, "But not human?"

"No. What difference does that make?"

"I believe it's the blood that prevents Nick from coming over. And there is of course the legend that a vampire must make a first kill before the condition is permanent. But that legend also involves killing the one who did the transformation."

"We don't even know if that's true, Jack," Nick pointed out.

"In other words, nothing is really known about vampirism, except what movies, books, and myths have told us. And we don't know what is factual, and what is just superstition," she said.

"Basically," Nick admitted, "I know I can't go out in the sun, and that I do have an aversion to holy objects. But a lot of our ideas about this condition do come from Hollywood."

"I just want to know who I am. Then I'll figure a way of adapting to this new life. Jack, can you help me regain my memory, at least?"

"I'll sure try."

\*

Nick studied her as they drove back to his apartment. He could see the disappointment and frustration etched on her face.

"Don't be discouraged. Jack said that hypnotism might work."

She snorted, "Yeah, but where are we going to find a hypnotist who treats vampires? More than likely, a shrink would try and discover why I was delusional."

Nick nodded, realizing that she was probably right.

"Are you sure you can't remember anything?"

She sighed, twisting to face him, "If I could, don't you think I'd tell you? All I can see are murky images. I can't bring anything into focus. I close my eyes and concentrate, but it's like I'm in a very dark room and am squinting to see what is in the light. If only I had my purse..."

Nick snapped his fingers. "That's it!" he said, turning the car around abruptly.

"What?" she asked.

"You had no personal effects when you were brought in. Maybe it's still at the scene."

"But wouldn't the police have searched?"

"Yes. But we can recheck it. Haven't you noticed how much sharper everything appears?"

She glanced around, and her eyes widened as she looked at the world through a vampire's eyes. "God! This is incredible. And my hearing!"

Nick grinned. "Be careful. It's easy to go into sensory overload. The tapestry of life seems so much richer than it's tempting to take it all in at once."

"You're right. I'm beginning to feel kind of woozy. How do you not notice?"

"Think of it as turning down the sharpness feature on a tv. Just let everything fade back into normalcy."

She blinked several times, following his analogy, and then looked over at him in surprise. "It worked."

"You sure are a fast learner. It took me weeks to perfect that," Nick said as he pulled the car to the curb. "Are you all right?" he asked her as she shivered.

"I was here. This is where he threw me out."

"You remember?"

"No. It's more of a gut feeling. A primeval fear."

"You can wait in the car."

"No! I want to go. I have to. Maybe if I confront this, I'll be able to remember who I am, so I can reweave the tapestry of *my* life."

"All right. Let's go." Nick walked around the car and opened her door, extending his hand. She grasped it.

They slowly walked into the alley with her gripping his hand more tightly with each step. He glanced at her as she gasped, and then released his hand to squat down and examine the pavement. "I was lying here. I felt like I was floating towards a beautiful light. I wanted to go to it, but I was afraid. This happened to dead people, and I couldn't be dead. Then I heard a siren, and suddenly I was being zipped into a body bag. I tried to tell them I wasn't dead, but I couldn't move.

I looked back to the illumination, and hovered there, undecided, but eventually I turned and began to walk into it. But then it started to shift and change. The angels transformed into demons. I ran away screaming, and that's when I sat up on Jack's table."

Nick bent down and drew her against him, rocking her gently. "Are you sure you don't want to go back to the car?"

"Yes." she said, as she pulled away, then stood. "If my purse is around here, I want to find it. I'll search this side of the alley, and you take that side."

Nick smiled at her sudden determination, admiring her strength. "Yes, ma'am."

\*

"Nick! Over here!"

Knight walked over to stand behind her, and craned his neck to look down the sewer grate, where he saw a small, jeweled evening bag.

"It has to be mine! It matches the dress you showed me." She turned and pulled Nick against her. "Now I can find out who I am!" She leaned away and gazed into his face, smiling, "I'm so glad you thought of this."

Nick blinked, and grinned back, "That's why I'm paid the big bucks." She laughed up at him, and then with her eyes growing serious, lightly traced the contours of his jaw, brushing across his lips, "Nick, when I'm better..."

He kissed her fingers, and nodded, then released her hand. "Now let's retrieve that purse."

\*

"Do you want me to open it?" Nick asked her several minutes later, as she held the bag hesitantly. "No. I'll do it." She swallowed hard, and with trembling fingers unzipped the bag. "These things

are so impractical. They don't hold anything," she said as she removed a lipstick. "Midnight crimson. How appropriate." A compact containing face powder followed, along with a small hairbrush, and nail polish the same hue as the lipstick. "It would seem I was a bit vain." Nick grinned, glad to see she still had her sense of humor. Next she pulled out a twenty dollar bill, and finally a credit card. She turned it over and silently read the name, frowning in concentration. Then her eyes widened, and she smiled, handing Nick the American Express card.

"Amaris Layla O'Malley. Member since 1985." He looked at her questioningly.

"Yes. That is my name. I don't remember everything, but I do know where I live. I wonder where my keys are? But I have a spare set hidden in my pool house... Nick, will you take me home?"

"Sure," he replied as he hooked his arm around her and led her out of the alley.

\*

Nick followed Amaris through her back yard absently noting the myriad of flowers and vaguely thinking that it was dangerous to have a pitchfork laying with the tongs facing up. Then he shifted his attention to the girl walking beside him.

She was so perfect. Amaris. Such a beautiful name. He was still amused by her explanation of its meaning, "child of the moon." She had said that while she always liked the unusual name, she had not meant for it to ever describe her so perfectly.

"Got the keys, but we'll have to go in the front door. I don't have any for the back door out here."

Nick obediently trailed her back through the yard, and around to the front. He followed her into the foyer, glancing at the artwork and deciding that whatever Amaris did, it paid well.

She strode confidently through the entrance hall, automatically flipping on lights. "Make yourself at home," she said to Nick as she went to her answering machine.

Nick half listened to several messages expressing concern about her whereabouts, some from her office wondering why she didn't even call in, but the one that got his full attention was from a man calling her honey, and babe, and wanting to know if they could please talk it out. *No, you may not talk it out!* Nick shook his head when he realized that he was jealous. And he had absolutely no right to be, even though this woman made him feel things he had thought were lost to him forever.

Nick studied her as she examined her mail, trying to learn more about herself. It must be very odd to be a total stranger to oneself... But, Nick often felt like a stranger inhabited his body, trying to steal the last vestiges of his faltering humanity. He cleared his throat, and then asked, "Anything else come back?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ignore you. I was trying to place the voices on the phone. The only one I really recognized was the last one - David Preswick. I'd rather talk with the devil himself than see that man again."

Nick smiled in satisfaction. "I'm glad to hear that," he said as he crossed the distance between them, and stared into her deep, dark eyes.

"Jealous?" she asked as she slid her arms around his neck, and settled her body against his.

Nick viciously pulled her to him, running his hands up and down her sides, relishing her sighs, and moans, and thrilling to the feel of her lips on his neck.

"I want you, Nick," she whispered as her tongue outlined his ear.

"It's not that simple. I haven't made love for many, many decades," he huskily replied.

He felt her smile against his neck as she said, "It's like riding a bicycle," while her hands explored his chest, to finally lightly trace the zipper of his pants. "See, your body hasn't forgotten." Her voice was breathy as she felt the bulge.

Nick groaned, lowering his mouth to hers, allowing his passion to burn, reveling in her taste, free from the anxiety of causing her harm. He pulled away, raggedly breathing to gaze down at her. He saw his own glowing eyes, and glittering teeth mirrored in her face. He smiled and easily lifted her, both of them sighing as she pressed her body close to his, and threaded her fingers through his dark hair.

"That way," she said pointing up the stairs. "It's the double French doors."

\*

"Shouldn't we go back to your apartment?" Amaris asked lazily while doodling patterns across Nick's stomach with her nails.

Nick stretched, and reluctantly answered her. "Yes. It will be dawn in a while. Why don't you get a few things?"

Amaris sat up, affording Nick a view of her breasts as the silk sheets pooled around her waist. "Quit ogling, Detective."

Nick jumped out of bed, saluting, "Yes ma'am." He turned, looking for his clothes, and felt the heat of her stare scorching his back. "Now who's ogling?"

He smiled as she giggled, "But it's such a great sight."

"You can stare at it all you want when we get back to my place."

"Can I also touch?"

"It's negotiable." Nick dressed, feeling more alive than he had since he had come into his present state. As Nick glanced over at her, watching her pack, and quietly humming, he promised himself that he would find the monster who had done this to her.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. Have you got everything you need?"

"Wait! I forgot my nightgown."

"But you won't need that."

"Sure of yourself, huh?"

Nick merely smiled in return, grabbed her hand and her suitcase, walked over to the balcony, opened the doors, and led her out.

"No, Nick. I'm not ready for this."

"It'll only be down to the car. Trust me."

She went over with him, screaming and hanging on tightly, pressing her face against his neck as they floated upward. "You have to open your eyes."

"Are you crazy?"

Nick continued flying slowly and gently, allowing her to grow accustomed to this ability. She had adapted to everything else, so why should this be a problem? With her in his arms, Nick experienced the sheer pleasure of flight. And as she gradually relaxed and opened her eyes, gasping with delight, Nick Knight knew that she was his chance for redemption.

"Nick! This is fantastic. It's so beautiful and free. Can I do this?"

"Sure. It's not that difficult, but it is almost dawn," he said, indicating the glow arising over the skyline.

"Ok. But you'll teach me tomorrow night?"

"Yes," he said as they landed by the car.

"Good. Now let's go home."

Nick smiled at the warm glow infusing him at those simple words, as he jumped into the caddy and sped to the old theater he called home.

\*

Nick watched as Amaris reluctantly uncorked a bottle and poured some into the cup. "Will I ever quit being woozy over the prospect of drinking blood?"

Nick took the bottle and poured some of the thick scarlet liquid into a glass. He didn't want to guzzle it in front of her. He raised his glass and lightly tapped hers. "To us, your average vampire couple."

Amaris tried to grin and then grimaced as she raised the cup. Nick watched with fascination as she sniffed it, and then slowly swirled it around. "It's not wine, you know."

"Just trying to get an appreciation for the stuff that I'll be drinking for an eternity. Wouldn't it be

better warm? I mean if you drink directly from the source, it hasn't been refrigerated. What we should do is microwave it."

Nick laughed, hugging her tightly. "I'm very glad we met."

"So I am I, but why couldn't you have just picked me up a singles bar?" she whispered into his ear.

"Of course! Maybe she'll have some idea of who did this to you."

"She. She who?" Amaris pulled back and stared at Nick with her eyes narrowed.

"Jealous? You have no reason to be," he insisted as he kissed her nose. "She is a very old friend who owns a nightclub. She's much more in touch with the vampire culture than me."

"Nick, would it really make a difference to know? I may not remember everything, but I am certain I never want to be near the thing that did this to me," she concluded with a shudder.

"You don't have to come. I'll just go by and ask a few questions and be back before you miss me. I need to know, ok?"

Amaris smiled, "I don't think I could refuse you anything, Nick. But I think I will go back to my house and try to figure out exactly who I am. I do have some explaining to do at work."

"Good. How are you going to get to your place?"

"Gee. How about a cab? And then I'll bring my car back here."

"That's a good idea," he said, pointedly ignoring the barb.

"Then I'll see you back here later? And you did promise to give me flying lessons tonight."

"Right. See you later."

"Hold on. Have you forgotten completely how to act toward a woman?"

Nick turned perplexed, and saw that she was waiting expectantly, hands on her hips. "Oh," he said, as he moved to take her in his arms and kiss her.

Many minutes later, Amaris pulled back breathing hard. "Well, you certainly haven't forgotten *that!* I'll see you later," she said as she left.

\*

Nick left the club without learning anything. The general consensus was that the rogue vampire who had attacked Amaris was probably a transient. He sighed, frustrated that he had wasted this time when he could have been with the lovely young woman; then he grinned when he realized that they would have a very long time to get to know each other.

**NICK!!!!**

Knight swerved, trying to determine where the terrified scream originated, then he pushed the gas as it suddenly hit him — the scream had come from within his own mind. Amaris needed him. He pulled out his police light and switched it on, disregarding all traffic signals, signs, and other drivers. *Please, God, let her be all right. She has to be. I love her, and that proves I have still have a chance at humanity. I know you haven't heard from me in a while, but she is my only hope for life.*

Nick slammed on the brakes, opening the door at the same moment. He sprinted out of the car and immediately flew up to her balcony, hearing the sounds of a struggle, and her strangled scream.

The vampire detective crashed through the glass doors, growling, and sensing his prey. The man released Amaris from his grip, and she immediately crumpled to the floor. He turned to face Nick and then laughed, "You are weak. Leave now, or I'll kill you." He started to turn back to the girl, but Nick leapt across the room, throwing him to the floor.

"Don't touch her," Knight ordered, enraged at her torn clothes, and the bruises coloring her body.

"She is mine. I did create her," he calmly informed Nick, and then threw his opponent across the room to collide with a china cabinet.

Momentarily disoriented, the detective shook his head and stood, slightly swaying, then advanced on his enemy again.

"You *are* persistent, aren't you?"

"What you did was throw her out and leave her for dead in an alley. You do *not* own her. She

is a free person."

"We won't debate her state, but she was dead when I finished with her. I'm not sure how she came back, but I intend to make the best of it."

"No." Nick knew at that moment that this malevolent *thing* would not have her, even if he had to die protecting her. Nick levitated, facing him in the air.

The two adversaries regarded each other, and Nick made the first move. He lunged at the creature, hitting him squarely in the chest, sending him flying against the wall.

The being snarled, then charged full-force at Nick, who was standing on the balcony. The detective waited, knowing his timing had to be perfect. He moved at the last possible second, sending the creature over the balcony.

Knight heard the other vampire's enraged howl, and then his scream of agony. Nick looked over the balcony and saw that the other had indeed been impaled on the pitchfork. Nick jumped down, grabbing a wooden stake that was supporting a small tree, and quickly thrust it through the wicked creature's heart, careful not to get sprayed by the blood.

Nick quickly went to Amaris. She was moaning. He gently gathered her against him, as her eyelids fluttered open. She tensed and started to scream, but Nick spoke soothingly, "It's okay. He's gone."

She shuddered, heaving a great sigh of relief, while cuddling closer into the haven of his arms. "The police..."

"I'll take care of them," Nick whispered.

"He's dead?"

"Yes. On your pitchfork."

"But, the body..."

"Jack will do the autopsy. Don't worry."

"I was supposed to learn flying tonight."

Nick smiled, continually amazed at her whimsical sense of humor and ability to bounce back from seemingly any situation. "We'll do it later."

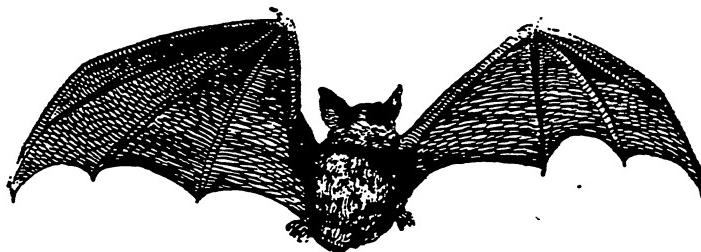
"I remember everything now. I couldn't wait to tell you."

"And you'll have plenty of time to do just that. Right now, you should just relax."

"Ok." she agreed, falling limply against him.

He held her, quietly murmuring words of assurance, as the sirens gradually grew louder and more insistent.

- The End -



## *Revelations*

*by*

*Diane Echelbarger*

*[Author's note: This story is the result of a challenge issued on the FORKNI-L mailing list, to write an "ending" story for Forever Knight. It was written before third season began.]*

"Uh, Nick," Schanke asked, "you got any plans for tomorrow night?"

"We've got tomorrow night off," Nick reminded him absently, most of his attention on looking for the street sign. They were a little early for their contact with the informant, but that was better than being late.

"Well, yeah," Schanke agreed. "That's why I asked if you had plans. Myra and I wanted you to come over for the evening."

Nick sighed. His partner never gave up. "Look, Schank, I'm sure Myra's a great cook, but with my condition—"

"Not for dinner," Schanke interrupted him. "I know you can't eat anything on that crazy macrobiotic diet of yours. Just come over, sit around, talk. Maybe play a couple of games of Sorry before Jenny's bedtime." He frowned at Nick, adding pointedly, "Most cops spend time with their partners outside of work, in case you didn't know."

The vampire spotted the street sign and turned. "Well, I guess I could," he conceded reluctantly. "But why now? You've never asked me over before, except for dinner."

"Yeah, well." Schanke stared out the side window uneasily. "Tomorrow's kind of a special occasion. Myra's niece is coming over. The one who just got out of med school."

"Myra's niece?" Nick slowed the Caddy and eased it through a pothole. "This isn't another one of your wife's matchmaking schemes, is it?"

"No way," Schanke snorted. "The kid's all of twenty-four. Way too young for you, and she's only going to be in town for one night, anyway. Some sort of convention."

"Then why invite me in on a family party?" his partner persisted.

"Well..." Schanke looked out the side window. "We...uh...kind of want to *avoid* a family party. It's an awkward situation. See, she's...uh..."

"She's what?" Nick prompted absently. The alley should be right up ahead.

"She's Jennie's real mom," Schanke muttered, so low that most mortals wouldn't have heard.

Nick slammed on the brakes and turned to stare at his partner. "Jennie's mom?" he repeated, shocked. "You mean you...?"

"Hey, what do you take me for?" Schanke cut him off angrily. "She was only fourteen, for God's sake. The father's some boy she met at a dance club. The family's strict Catholic, so abortion was out, and Myra and I'd always wanted kids. It seemed like the perfect solution; we'd have had to spend years on adoption waiting lists otherwise."

"Waiting lists?"

Schanke hesitated, then continued warily. "Yeah, well, I don't exactly want the fact advertised, Knight, but well—"

"You can't have kids." Nick made it a statement, flat and uninflected, and started the Caddy

moving again.

"Well...no," Schanke admitted. He glanced at his partner. Seeing the sympathy there, he relaxed a little. An awkward silence descended. Trying for a normal tone, he said, "So, will you come over tomorrow? Myra and I'd really appreciate it, Nick. I mean...I don't *think* Sandra will let the cat out of the bag..."

His partner turned the car carefully into the alley. With all those dumpsters and trash bins, it would be a tight fit. "Sure, Schank," he acceded. "Glad to help. Maybe I could bring Nat, too?"

Schanke's sigh of relief would have been clearly audible even to mortal ears. "Yeah, sure, great idea!" he enthused as Nick stopped the car. "This the place?"

"Close enough. The informant said he wanted to meet me on that loading dock." Nick gestured to a space farther down the alley, where a smaller building formed its own cul-de-sac. "I figured you could find cover behind the dumpsters at the other end, in case I need backup."

"This one of your regulars?"

The blond man shook his head. "New guy, got in contact with me through a girl I helped out a while ago. If it was a regular, I wouldn't need backup." *Not that I need it, anyway, but Schanke doesn't know that*, the vampire thought. *There've been too many "supercop" jokes lately; this should help...*

"Okeydokey, partner," Schanke agreed.

They climbed out of the Cadillac and walked down the alley together. Nick turned into the dead-end and climbed to the loading dock at the back of the building, while Schanke worked his way past trash bins, discarded boxes, and dumpsters to the other entrance to the alley. He was starting to appraise the surrounding clutter for the best hiding place when a figure suddenly stepped out from between two stacks of boxes.

And shot him through the heart.

The muffled *thud* of the silenced pistol took a second to register with Nick, who was searching the narrow spaces between pallet-loads of equipment for his informant. No sooner had he identified the sound than he twisted free of the confining stacks and rushed to where the stranger stood over Schanke.

His vampiric senses at full, he saw the man pull Schanke's gun from its holster and scented the blood that spread in a dark stain across his partner's chest.

With a wordless snarl of pure rage, he knocked the man into the wall. A small part of his mind noted the *crack* as the murderer's neck broke.

The vampire knelt at his partner's side. The quick gush of heart's-blood had slowed to a trickle, then stopped. Desperate, he listened for Schanke's heart. *It can't be.* The beat was faint, erratic. *Not Schanke.* It stuttered. *It's all my fault.* Stopped.

Nick stood, slowly easing Schanke to the ground, and walked toward the Caddy. If his partner's murderer wasn't already dead, he soon would be. He had to call dispatch, get the coroner's van. Then, somehow, he'd have to tell Myra...

Nick was past the loading dock when the body crumpled against the wall shifted and stood up. The man reached into one of the boxes stacked near him. He pulled out two long, thin shapes, and walked over to stand at Schanke's feet.

Schanke moaned softly and opened his eyes. Someone was standing over him, a short, stocky man in a long trenchcoat. The man dropped something at his feet with a metallic clatter. Then he stepped back and spoke.

"I am Gunter Reichmann. Defend yourself." He raised a sword almost as tall as himself with both hands.

*A sword? You gotta be kidding*, Schanke thought, still dazed. He fumbled for his gun, but the holster was empty. Another sword lay at his feet. "Look, buster, I'm a cop," he bluffed desperately. *Didn't someone just shoot me? Why don't I hurt?*

"Doesn't matter," the lunatic replied flatly. "There can be only one. Pick up the sword, or I kill you now."

*Only one? Only one what?* the detective wondered as he reached for the blade at his feet. *And where the hell is Nick?*

As Schanke's voice reached him, Nick froze, one hand on the Caddy's door. *It can't be*, Nick thought in confusion. *He's dead; I heard his heart stop!* Then he was flying back up the alley.

Nick raced the last few yards in a blur of speed, then took the sword from Schanke's hand. His partner collapsed back onto the ground as Nick took up a guard position at his side.

"If you want to fight," Nick told the man with the claymore, "you can fight me." He held the broadsword easily, old reflexes flooding back at the feel of the hilt in his palm.

The crazy pulled out his gun and shot Nick at point-blank range.

The vampire didn't even flinch.

The man stared at him a moment, shocked, then blustered, "You can't interfere, not now. It is the way. I have challenged him."

*Way? What way?* Schanke wondered, staring at the bullet hole in the back of Nick's coat. *One of these days, he's going to have to learn to duck.*

Nick's voice took on that growl that meant he was 'going weird'. "I'm not one of you," he told the crazy. "I don't have to follow your 'way'."

Nick attacked the man before he could recover from the shock.

The battle was less unequal than he'd feared. His opponent wasn't as out of practice in swordwork as he, but Nick's superhuman speed and strength compensated for that. The two, Immortal and vampire, fought over and around Nick's fallen partner for a few moments, swords ringing. Then, Nick caught the Immortal's blade in a binding maneuver that had saved his life more than once in the Crusades, and disarmed him.

Nick took his head on the backstroke.

The headless corpse fell to its knees. A moment later, tendrils of energy snaked out of the body, arcing through the narrow alley in a fantastic pyrotechnic display. The few lights nearby exploded, and energy crackled in the narrow space—

—and entered the only suitable receptacle. Schanke.

He had just pulled himself to his knees when the Quickening caught him. He jerked like a badly-controlled puppet, feeling the energy enter him, filling a place deep inside he hadn't even known existed until that moment. His mind was overwhelmed by a flood of emotions, memories, sensations...

Then it was over. Dizzy and exhausted, Schanke shook his head. Nick was just standing there, the blood-stained broadsword grounded at his side, watching him.

"What the...?" His question was drowned out by the roar of a powerful motorcycle.

As it pulled into the alley and stopped, the detective felt a moment of disorientation. The rider dismounted and removed his helmet. He was a curly-headed kid, early twenties, and the boy's eyes shifted warily from Nick, to the corpse, to Schanke.

"Hello, Richie." Nick bent casually to wipe his blade on the corpse's coat. "How's Duncan?"

"Nick?" The kid was obviously off-balance. His eyes shuttled between the two cops. "You aren't...?"

"No," Nick agreed. "He is." And he nodded at his partner.

Richie nodded, absently, and nudged the corpse's head with the toe of his boot, rolling the face into sight. "Reichmann," he said. "Mac warned me about him. He specializes in taking on new Immortals, ones who haven't learned enough to be dangerous." He looked up at Nick. "That's what happened here, right?" He nodded at the sword. "And you stopped him."

"Your 'rules' don't apply to me," Nick told him, putting the sword down on a packing case.

The dizziness had faded and Schanke had just about had enough. "Wait a minute," he demanded, climbing to his feet. "Immortals? Rules? Just what the hell is going on here, Nick?" He glared from

one man to the other in annoyance. "Is somebody going to explain this, or are you trying to get me to die of curiosity?"

The two men chuckled.

"Not possible," Richie assured him. "Trust me, I know. As for what's going on... Well, there's no easy way to say it. You're an Immortal."

"A what?" Schanke blurted. Then a horrible thought occurred to him. He looked down at his chest. There was a bullet hole in his shirt, just like... "I'm..." He looked up at Nick, then at Richie. *The kid at least has a tan...*

"Can I, like, still go out in the sun?" he asked the kid.

The kid looked puzzled. "Yeah."

"And I can still eat, right?" the detective continued.

"You'd better." Richie really sounded confused now. "Why wouldn't—?"

"I think I'd better explain this, Richie," Nick interrupted him quickly. "I can give Schanke the basics, and he'd probably believe me sooner than you. Then you can fill in the details later, okay?"

"Well, okay," the kid agreed, reluctantly. "But how—"

"Where are you staying?" Nick interrupted again. "We'll be in touch, but someone's probably called this in by now. You don't want to be involved with an attempted cop-killing, do you."

It wasn't a question, and Richie apparently realized that. "No," he agreed hastily. "I'm staying at a B&B in the Beaches." He recited the address.

"Right." Nick nodded. "We'll be in touch."

The kid returned the nod, got on his bike, and left.

An awkward silence descended on the alley. The two detectives shot furtive looks at each other, neither wanting to go first.

"Nick, I—"

"Schanke—"

They spoke at the same moment, and stopped. Stared at each other.

Schanke took a deep breath, noted gratefully that he *could* still breathe, and took the plunge. "I'm..." He licked his lips, nervously. "I'm not like you, am I?"

"You mean..." Nick hesitated.

Schanke suddenly got tired of being long-suffering and patient. "I mean, am I a *vampire*!" he snapped. "Like you." As Nick stared, flummoxed, he added, "For God's sake, Nick, it's been *three years*! I'd think you'd know you could trust me by now!"

"You...you knew?" the vampire asked weakly. "How long—?"

"Since you pulled that nut with the Uzi out the window, our first night together," Schanke told him. "You weren't exactly subtle about it, y'know. Jeeze," he added, exasperated, "when I think of all the times I covered for you, didn't say anything about the bullet holes or the quick escapes... How could I *not* figure it out, for crying out loud?"

"But—" the vampire stammered. "You...you never said anything—"

"Yeah, well, Stonetree told me to keep it quiet."

"*Stonetree* knew!?" Nick yelped.

"Yeah, well, anyway I think he did," his partner elaborated. "He didn't come right out and say so, but I always figured..."

"Who else?" Nick demanded, panicked. "Cohen? Does Cohen know?" He grabbed Schanke's shirtfront in both hands.

"Calm down, willya?" Schanke tried to pry his partner's hands free, without much success. "No, I don't think she does. I don't *think* anyone else does, but I wouldn't be surprised. You haven't exactly been hiding things very well lately. I mean, jeeze, Nick, when IA went through your apartment I thought they'd figure it out for sure. The blood, and those pictures of you with dates on the back. You're just lucky I was there, pal."

Nick stared at his partner in shock. He's always thought Schanke was just too unobservant to figure it out. Stupid, he realized now. No one who wasn't a good observer made it to Detective, these

days. And to realize that Schanke had been covering for him, all this time...

He slowly eased his grip on Schanke's shirt. Absently, he noted the bullet hole between his hands. Then, as exactly what that hole meant clicked home, he let go quickly and stepped back.

Schanke looked down at whatever had snapped Nick back to reality. And saw a neat little, bloodstained hole in his shirt and the perfect, undamaged skin below it. He swallowed. "So," he queried, poking a finger into the hole, "you want to tell me what this *does* mean, *partner*?"

Nick took a deep breath. Not that he needed the oxygen, but it helped him calm down. "Sure," he said, with what he hoped was an easy smile. "How about I buy you a souvlaki and we talk about it?" He put one arm around his partner's shoulder and steered him out of the alley. "I think I owe you one. Or two. Just don't breathe on me afterward, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Schanke agreed. "And you're still coming over tomorrow night, right?" He hesitated. "But, what *am* I, Nick? What's all this 'Immortal' stuff *mean*?"

"It means," Nick assured him, "that you and I are going to be partners for a long, *long* time—"

As the two cops walked away, a figure opened a window above them, and the strains of a tune from "Gypsy" floated out over the darkened street as the camera panned upward...

*Wherever we go,*

"Hey, Nick?"

*Whatever we do,*

"Yeah, Schanke?"

- *We're going to do it together!*

"How old are you, anyway?"

*Through thick and through thin,*

"Eight hundred."

*All out or all in,*

"Eight hundred? No kidding?"

*We're gonna go through it together!*

"Well, give or take a couple of decades."

*Together, forever!*

"Wow..."

*Together, wherever we go...*

(IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY A PROMO TRAILER FOR "KNIGHT AND DAYE," THE ADVENTURES OF TWO VERY UNUSUAL PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS WHO HAVE RECENTLY MOVED TO PHILDELPHIA.)

- The End -

("Revelations" is reprinted here with permission of the author.)

## Alternative Lifestyles

by

Margaret L. Carter

Despite the crudity of dalliance in a parking lot, Nigel couldn't wait any longer. Nor did he want to prolong the tedious parts of the evening by taking Julie to his apartment — or visiting hers — and having to disentangle himself later. The overhanging oak tree in the corner of the faculty lot where he'd left his silver Corvette gave ample cover at this time of night. He'd noted with pleasure that the lot was deserted when he walked Julie down from his office in the Psychology building. For a man with Nigel's special needs, a graduate assistantship offered perks beyond money and teaching experience. He could meet undergraduates one-on-one and discreetly take advantage of them without arousing suspicion.

An unwise habit, he knew, one he should try to break, but the situation was so irresistibly convenient. Especially when the target already had a crush on him, as Julie did. He'd had her half-entranced even before they'd left the building. Now, on a fragrant Charlottesville spring night, he leaned against the hood of his car and drew the tall, slender girl close. She gazed at him, vacant-eyed, while he stroked her short-cropped, curly black hair. Her height made it easy to kiss her without bending over and getting a cramp in his neck.

The thought gave him a twinge of guilt. Seeing any advantage in a casual donor such as Julie felt like disloyalty to Denise *Knock it off*, he told himself. *Guilt is a human weakness. You have no choice, so relax and enjoy your meal.* Much as he yearned for an exclusive relationship with Denise, he knew the constant demands of his appetite would endanger her health. True, Nigel had heard of exclusive commitments that seemed to work, but he considered the risk unacceptable. Besides, Denise lived in Williamsburg, over two hours away, and both were busy with academic careers.

So he had to feed on others during their times apart. Animal blood couldn't sustain him over a two or three week separation. The memory of their last meeting, two weeks ago, sharpened his hunger. Next weekend he would drive down to visit her. *Only seven more nights...* In the two years since he'd "accidentally" allowed Denise to notice clues to his real nature, while persuading her to help him with a midnight raid on the Rare Books collection at the William and Mary library, she had become vital to his welfare. As a Psychology major, he didn't believe in accidents where human — or inhuman — behavior was concerned. On some level, he must have wanted to reveal himself to her and move beyond friendship to intimacy. Because of his fixation on Denise, someone like Julie could be no more than a stopgap, a cheap supermarket vintage compared to a fine claret. He swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth. His throat burned with need.

When his fingers crept under Julie's hair to massage the nape of her neck, she moaned aloud. The sound made his stomach cramp impatiently. *I'm not taking advantage of her, not really. She'll enjoy it, even though she won't remember it.* Not that he could bring himself to bestow sexual fulfillment on these substitute donors. That would feel too much like unfaithfulness to Denise.

*Forget about her for a moment. She isn't here, and Julie is.* He nibbled on the entranced girl's earlobe. The heat of her lean body and the throbbing of her heart made him dizzy. His lips wandered

down to her throat.

Abruptly the warm fog that enveloped him shattered. An angry aura clashed with Julie's languid one. "Nigel Jamison, how *could* you!"

He thrust Julie out of his embrace, then automatically stilled her with a touch to her forehead. Once assured that she wouldn't wake, he turned to face the woman who stood a few yards away. Denise.

She glared at him with her arms folded, her long, straight, dark brown hair rippling in the breeze. Her agitation made her aura crackle like lightning and her skin glow with the blood racing beneath it. Though he loomed a foot taller than her petite five-four, she looked far from intimidated. Rather, she appeared ready to leap up and scratch his eyes out. For an instant Nigel ignored the anger she emitted and let himself luxuriate in her vitality. She said in a harsh whisper that quavered with tears of rage, "I drive out here to surprise you, and this is what I find!"

Now he collected himself enough to notice her car parked across the lot, still radiating heat from the engine. "Please, little one—"

"Don't call me that!"

He quickly turned to the other woman, who stood in passive silence beside him. "Julie, you'll go home now and forget all this. We separated in the parking lot, and nothing else happened." Julie responded with a dreamy nod and meandered to her car. Nigel watched until she pulled out of the lot and drove away. His head pounding with frustration, he turned to Denise. "She's just a student. I've never touched her before — she simply happened to be available."

Denise rubbed her eyes with the back of one hand. "Is that supposed to make it better?"

He struggled to keep a rein on his temper. He knew Denise's volatile mood sprang partly from physical tension. They shared an addiction both literal and mutual — she needed the secretions from his bite almost as much as he needed her blood. So their separations deprived her, too. But in his present mood he had trouble keeping this fact in mind. He didn't feel the least bit reasonable. "You've known all along that I fed from other donors."

Warily she inched closer to him. "Knowing it isn't the same as seeing it. Of course, how could any woman resist that wavy black hair and that pale, romantic, languishing look? Tall, dark, and devastating!" Despite her sarcasm, he felt her wrath beginning to fade.

"What the devil are you doing here, anyway?" He couldn't quite keep the exasperation out of his voice.

"I told you, I wanted to surprise you. I had some unexpected free time and thought you'd be glad to see me. Looks like I wasted my time and gas."

"Damn it, if you'd just called first—!" A red mist swam before his eyes. He breathed deeply to dispel it.

"Oh, then I wouldn't have caught you in the act, and everything would be okay?"

He clenched his jaws, sending a stab of pain through his temples. "True, I wouldn't have wanted you to see that. You think I *like* drinking from other people?"

"You didn't seem to be suffering just then." Her breathing was harsh and ragged. "Oh, Lord, do I look like that — some mindless animal in heat — when you —"

"You know I've never hypnotized you when we make love, and I never will."

"Make love?" She gave a brittle laugh. "I thought that's what it was. But maybe I'm just a convenient snack."

*Good God, after two years together, I'd think she'd have gotten past that!* "Can't you sense what I feel for you?" He stepped toward her, reaching for her hand. She let him clasp it for a second, then snatched it back. "If I thought of you as a victim, I wouldn't waste time arguing, would I?" He knew that their intimacy had awakened some empathic potential in her, so that in receptive moments she picked up his emotions -- but never when anger clouded her mind, and never with the same precision that he read her feelings. "We can't settle this in the parking lot. Come home with me."

"All right, but I don't want to leave my car here. I'll follow you."

"Very well." He suppressed a sigh, aware that her refusal to ride with him was a way of maintaining a barrier.

She was growing calmer, at least. "I'm sorry I blew up. You weren't doing anything I didn't already know about. It just looked so... We do need to talk."

*Talk? I'm so ravenous my damn teeth are tingling, and she wants to talk?* Maybe this intimacy stuff was overrated. With Julie, he would have been gorged by now. He smiled wryly to himself as he started the Corvette. Of course he didn't mean that. The quality of his nights with Denise more than compensated for the infrequency.

A few minutes later he stopped in front of his apartment building, a restored Victorian three miles from the University campus. He waited in the car until Denise's green compact pulled up behind him. They did need to talk, for he'd been putting off telling her about the job offer he'd received. Though it appealed to him, he hesitated to relocate so far from Denise, nor did he look forward to dealing with her probable reaction to the news. Whether she begged him to stay or encouraged him to leave, the topic would cause additional stress.

As they walked up the porch steps, she let him take her arm. A hopeful sign. He might not have to starve much longer, after all. "I came here first," she said, watching him unlock the door on the left, which led to his unit. "When you weren't here, I decided to try to catch you at the University. Guess I should have called." He gratefully noticed that she wore no makeup or perfume, mindful of how his sensitive nose reacted to artificial fragrances.

"Let me get you a drink," he said after he'd bolted the door behind them. He had to maintain some distance if he expected to carry on a conversation instead of ravishing her on the spot. Tension still hummed in his veins. She followed him into the kitchen, where he got out one of the wine coolers he kept for her all too infrequent visits. He usually made the trip to see her, since she not only found the drive tiring, she also seemed uneasy in his home. One reason sat on the butcher's block table near the back door — a cage of white rats. Though she knew he used the rodents for food when he didn't have time to hunt, she didn't like having to look at the evidence. Just as she'd hated seeing him with Julie. That reaction he could understand, but the rats? Sometimes he thought Denise liked to pretend he was an ordinary man with a few dietary restrictions.

Accepting her drink from him, she gave the Habittrail a nervous glance and hurried back to the living room. On the way, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it into the bedroom. He felt overheated, and his nerves prickled as if charged with static electricity. Transformation might help. He hadn't changed, much less flown, in over a week. The ability to shift the configuration of his surface molecules and assume a winged shape, though more hazardous than convenient in the middle of a modern city, needed to be exercised. Suppressing the drive for too long made him edgy. But he knew Denise wouldn't react well to a shape-change at this moment. Nor could he risk perturbing her further by killing a rat to cool his thirst. Turning on a small, low-wattage lamp — at least she remembered that in his present condition, bright light would hurt his eyes — she curled up at one end of the wing-backed sofa and watched him.

He paced back and forth across the Persian carpet. "You've known what I am for the past two years. You aren't one of those idiots who get squeamish about cats hunting birds — why do you try to make me feel guilty for the way I have to live?"

"Birds don't have self-awareness." Denise shook her head. "I know it's not logical. But seeing you with another woman—" Her temper flared anew. "I don't have to depend on you, you know. Other guys do ask me out. I always turn them down."

"It's not the same thing." He sat on the arm of the couch and rubbed his eyes. The headache hadn't improved any.

"I know, but I can't help the way I feel."

He stared at her. She gazed back, unafraid, over the rim of her glass. "Denise, as much as I'd like to be with you constantly, you know it would endanger your health. And even if we wanted to take that chance, would you give up your job to move here?" Having received her Master's degree the previous year, she taught English at a community college near Williamsburg.

"With the humanities job market the way it is, I'd have to think long and hard about that." Nigel was encouraged to see her attempt a smile.

"That brings up something I need to tell you," he said. "You know I flew out to Berkeley for an interview last month." She nodded. "Well, they've offered me a tenure-track position in their Psych department." For a newly-fledged Ph.D. — Nigel would be awarded his doctorate that June — the offer was a remarkable prize.

Denise stiffened. After a minute she said softly, "Will you accept?"

"I haven't answered them yet," he sighed. "But it's not something to turn down lightly."

"You don't even need to work. You could live on your family's money — or the clan's, or whatever you really belong to." He had told her almost nothing about his people; since they lived solitary rather than gregarious most of the time, the information wasn't relevant to his friendship with Denise. Anyway, he couldn't share secrets that weren't his own.

"True, I could, but I'd hate being idle. Damned boring." He raked his fingers through his thick, black hair. Couldn't she feel his tension? Why didn't she do something about it, instead of sitting over there arguing? "I enjoy the stimulation of working with intelligent people. Intelligent for ephemerals, that is." She frowned. "Present company excluded, of course." He stood up to resume pacing. "About those other men who want to date you — maybe you should say yes once in a while."

"Nigel, what are you saying?" She sounded hurt. "You don't want to break up, do you?"

He sat beside her and clasped one of her hands in both of his. "Good God, no! I'm thinking of you. Maybe you need some distance. I know perfectly well that I can't give you everything you want."

She evaded his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't be disingenuous! Don't try to claim you haven't thought about a normal life, marriage, children. If we spent the rest of your life together, you wouldn't have any of that."

"There's plenty of time," she said. "I'm only in my twenties, for goodness' sake." But the protest lacked conviction.

He'd noticed her giving babies in strollers an occasional wistful glance. More immediately, he'd noted her reaction when they shared a bed. After the first couple of times, she hadn't wanted to see him naked. Though he never failed to bring her to ecstasy with his mouth and hands, he sensed that she missed "the real thing" and preferred not to be reminded of his physiological differences from human males.

"And if we did stay together for decades" — until she'd outgrown all reasonable hope of finding a human mate — "how would you feel when you began to...age...and I didn't? It wouldn't bother me, but I suspect it would bother you." He slipped his arm around her shoulders. The throbbing of her heart, so close, made him lightheaded.

She put down her glass and leaned on him. "I don't know. It's so hard to imagine, how do I know how it would affect me? That's not what worries me right now. I'm more disturbed about you preying on other people. When I saw you tonight — it wasn't just jealousy." He sensed that she was sincere, groping toward some truth. "People like that girl in the parking lot aren't consenting partners. I never gave it much thought before — it's like robbery or rape."

His chest tightened. "I don't hurt them. They never remember, and they don't miss what I take." Though he felt no guilt for feeding on his natural prey, he did feel troubled about the act's effect on Denise.

She stubbornly shook her head. "It's still a form of theft. You're making me an accomplice."

He pulled back and stared down at her. "What would you do about it? Turn me in to the authorities?"

"You know I wouldn't do that! But I don't know how I'm going to deal with this. I can't forget that girl's vacant stare, that zombie look."

*Zombie? That's not how I remember her looking!* A fierce pang of hunger stabbed him. He stroked Denise's hair, forcing himself to relax. "Well, you saved me from my baser impulses this time." The attempt at humor didn't work. She still felt tense in his arms. "Little one—"

She glared at him. "Stop calling me that! I'm not a pet!"

"Forgive me. You know I don't think of you that way. We've been friends too long."

He felt the dampness of tears on his chest. "I'm so confused," she said. "I want to be with you,

but I don't know if I can handle the way you have to live, and I know it's not fair to ask you to turn down that job offer for me when I don't even know what I want." She rubbed her cheek against his skin. He suppressed a groan. "Sometimes, considering that irresistible hypnotic power you have, I wonder if our — closeness — is even real. Maybe a trial separation would be the best thing, after all."

He noticed she didn't use the word "love." She never had, and he himself wasn't sure what the word meant. Another human concept. *Damn, seeing me with Julie was the worst thing that could have happened right now.* "After all this time, can you doubt that my caring is genuine?" If only he could touch her mind, make his emotions clear to her and share hers at the deepest level. A two-way exchange of blood would give them that power. But his own fear restrained him, as well as fear of her reaction. He didn't know if he could bring himself to trust an ephemeral that far, even Denise.

"Doubt? Oh, I'm a bundle of doubts." She gave a shaky laugh. "But I do believe you believe you mean what you're saying. If not, you'd just overwhelm me with those dark powers of yours." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

With a low growl, he stood up, drawing her into a tight embrace. She gasped as his mouth covered hers. He felt her soften and glow with desire. Her blood-heat on his bare chest made his skin tingle. The hair on the nape of his neck bristled, and his back and shoulder muscles quivered. He yielded to the transforming drive, too impassioned to think about his lover's probable reaction.

Silken wings, electric with transmuting energy, unfurled from his back, while a velvet coating of hair spread down his chest and arms. He fought to block the sharpening of his claws and teeth — that part of the change was meant for intimidation, not feeding. To pierce the tender flesh of a lover, he needed only the inconspicuous razor edge of his incisors. Enzymes in his saliva made the process not only painless but euphoric.

The release of the change sent a shudder of pleasure through him. Denise's fingers crept over his shoulders to caress the edge of the delicate wing membrane. Whenever he showed her this aspect of his nature — which was very seldom — she displayed a sort of queasy fascination. This time was no exception. She stroked him tentatively as if both allured and repelled. He closed his eyes and held himself rigid. With his molecules in flux, he was hypersensitive to her touch. "Please... Be careful..."

Letting out his breath in a hiss, he grasped her wrists to guide her hands away from the wings. At the same time, he leaned over to lick the seductive arc of her throat. Abruptly he felt her tense up.

He opened his eyes to gaze into hers. "Don't look at me that way," she whispered. "It makes me feel like you're draining my will. Like what I saw you doing—"

"Oh, damn!" He let her go and stepped back. She staggered and barely kept from falling.

"Nigel, I'm sorry. That's the first time I've seen what you do from the *outside*, and I can't erase it from my mind." She brushed at her disheveled hair. "I'll probably be ready for this a little later, but not right now. I need some fresh air — and time to think. I'm going for a walk."

He stood trembling, fists clenched at his sides. "At this time of night, alone?"

"Alone is exactly what I need." She retreated to the door. "This isn't downtown Washington. Nothing will happen to me. I'll be back soon."

Even if she hadn't insisted he leave her alone, he wouldn't have dared follow her at that instant. He felt like snarling at her, dragging her into his arms, and ravishing her. *Yeah, right, the perfect way to build trust!* He reversed the shape-change, until he looked fully human again. Breathing hard, he forced himself to wait a few more minutes — long enough for Denise to get out of sight of the apartment — before he went outside.

Of course he wouldn't let her wander around at night unprotected. No city was completely safe after dark for a young human female. *Maybe she's right, to some extent I do think of her as a pet, a helpless creature needing protection.* Ephemerals were so fragile, with their weak muscles, sluggish reflexes, and sieve-like memories. What possessed him to entrust his happiness to such a frail bit of flesh? Too late to stop caring; she was important to him, and he wouldn't let her waltz into danger. He planned to follow at a discreet distance until she headed back to his home. On the tree-shadowed sidewalk, fading heat traces visible to his infrared vision showed him which direction she'd walked. As soon as he reached the next block, he glimpsed a moving figure far ahead and recognized the familiar tones of Denise's aura.

She walked at a brisk pace toward a nearby park.

The cool night air relieved Nigel's headache but did nothing to blunt the edge of his hunger. Denise's teasing touch on his wings had made it worse. If she didn't want him tonight, he would have to feed elsewhere, however inadequate the substitute.

A few blocks down, she turned toward the park. Nigel's nerves bristled. *What's the matter with her, going in there? Silly little fool, doesn't she suspect how delicious she looks?* Well, human predators might not put it in quite those terms, but they would still find her enticing bait. Closing the distance by a block or so, Nigel gathered his concentration to shroud himself in a psychic veil so that a casual glance from Denise or anyone else would slide past without seeing him.

Her pace slowed by the time he caught up with her. He watched her stroll to a bench beside a pond and sit down. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

*If only I could make her understand how much I care — but that I can change for her only so far.* He knew she didn't really want a vampire lover. Though fond of him, she felt that way *in spite of* his strangeness. If he could magically become "normal," she would be content. *That's how she thinks of my "condition," as exactly that, a sort of incurable handicap.*

He caught sight of a man walking among the trees. The figure wandered in Denise's direction. Nigel restrained himself from attacking. He'd imbibed lifelong habits of caution, and the interloper might be harmless.

A shift in the breeze carried the odor of stale cigarettes and unwashed clothes and flesh. The man shambled over to the bench.

Denise looked up at him, trying to edge away and conceal her fear at the same time. Nigel glided closer, still wearing an aura of invisibility.

"Hey, miss," the man said in a tobacco-roughened voice. "Got a cigarette and a match?"

She sidled to the far end of the bench. "No, I'm sorry."

"Then how about helping me out with a couple dollars?"

"I don't have any money."

"Aw, come on..." he whined. Denise stood up. He grabbed her wrist.

Nigel waited no longer. Dropping the psychic veil and allowing his wings to blossom at the same instant, he charged. Using the wings for balance, he flung the man to the ground. On the way down, the victim's head hit a tree with a gratifying thud. Nigel raked his claws across the man's throat.

The scent of blood snapped his fragile self-control. The crimson fog coalesced before his eyes. He crouched over the unconscious man and drank, heedless of the foul smell and taste.

He became aware of a fist hammering his arm and a faint voice calling his name. Sluggishly he turned toward the interruption.

"Nigel, stop! Don't kill him!"

He snarled a warning. Denise cringed from him. *My God, Denise!* He removed his talons from the victim's shoulder blades and stood up, shaking. Wide-eyed, Denise stared at him. "It's all right," he said, hardly able to force out the words. "The man's not dead. He'll recover."

With cooler awareness of what he'd been feeding on, his stomach churned. He swallowed several times, fighting nausea. "I'm sorry you had to see that." Shuddering from the strain, he forced himself back into his normal shape.

He felt Denise battling fear as she offered her hand to him. "I'm sorry I walked out on you."

"We'd better get away from here, before he comes to."

As they walked hand in hand toward Nigel's apartment, Denise said, "But he saw you — transformed."

"If he remembers at all, he'll think it was the DT's." The attack had taken the edge from his appetite, so that he felt safe touching Denise, though still wary of getting too close.

"Thank you — I guess. I could probably have gotten rid of him myself."

"Maybe. I wouldn't take that chance with your life." Back at the apartment, Nigel went directly to the master bath to wash off the stench of his victim. A drink of cold water steadied his stomach. Meanwhile, he heard Denise splashing in the other bathroom. He stripped to shorts and lay down on his

bed. He couldn't face the prospect of approaching Denise and getting rejected again.

He didn't have to. She hesitantly entered the bedroom, groping in the near-dark that was comfortable to his nocturnal eyes. He waited, perfectly still, until she sat down beside him. He clasped her hand and drew it to his chest. The fragrance of soap mingled with her female scent. Her heartbeat sounded like thunder to him.

"Forgive me for the way I've acted," she said. "I didn't realize how desperate you were."

He kissed her fingertips. *But she ought to realize! After all this time together, we should be better attuned!* Another unaccustomed twinge of guilt pricked him. *I expect too much from her. She already gives me more than I ever dared hope for.*

He wrapped his arms around her, guiding her to lie on top of him. The heat and pressure of her body reawakened his need. "You won't change your mind at this point, will you? I couldn't stand it."

"No, I promise — I'm here for you now." She nuzzled his neck.

He gasped and convulsively tightened his embrace. "Take it easy! I'm still — unstable."

"I'm not afraid." Sensing the half-truth in that vow saddened him. She had never seen his predatory nature unmasked before. "Nigel, about that Berkeley offer—"

"Yes?"

"I think you should accept."

Hearing the hesitancy in her tone, he kept his voice gentle. "Why?"

"I've decided you're right about needing distance — perspective. I need to think seriously about my life and our relationship. That's hard to do with distractions like this." She lightly nipped his shoulder.

Growling deep in his throat, he stroked the nape of her neck. "I can't argue about the 'distraction' part."

"If we see each other less often, the physical aspects won't cloud our judgment so much."

Though he'd initiated the idea himself, he felt irrationally disappointed at her agreement. *Is she that repulsed by my loss of control? Is she fishing for an excuse to pave the way for a break-up?* "You're quite right. After we've been apart for awhile, we should know whether we really want to share our lives."

"Or if it's only lust pulling us together." She rubbed, catlike, against his shoulder. "After all, Berkeley isn't on another planet. And you won't be leaving for months yet. We have plenty of time."

"Yes, we have tonight." His tongue flicked her earlobe and traced a path down the curve of her neck. "And many other nights." He surrendered to the lure of her pulse and drowned their doubts in passion.

- The End -

*[Nigel and Denise also appeared in Good Guys Wear Fangs 1 and 2.]*

## **MIDNIGHT LIES**

*by Heidi Staneslow*

*Take back  
Your midnight lies  
What I should think?  
How I should feel?*

*This horror.  
These lies.  
Are your life -  
why must they be mine?*

*In you I saw  
eternity - to live,  
to enjoy, to love.  
I was willing, yes.*

*Now you want  
me to live as you?  
On fear, on hate, on terror?  
This for eternity? No.*

*I thank you  
for your gift. How  
can I ever forget that  
night, your eyes, your touch?*

*Just tell me  
no more midnight lies.  
Just leave me to my  
own loneliness. Fine.*

*Hunger or no,  
Life or no,  
I'll never be good  
at telling midnight lies.*

## *Night / Fall*

*by*

*Denysé M. Bridger*

"You're taking me where?" Natalie Lambert looked at the smirking detective and felt a distinct urge to shake him.

"The ballet," Nick informed her, his smile still solidly in place. "It's the Royal Canadian, and I have the best box seats in the house."

Natalie considered the impromptu invitation for a few moments, then shrugged. "When?"

"About forty minutes from now," he told her as he manoeuvred into a position that put him out of her immediate reach.

"What?!"

"I know it's kind of last minute, Nat— "

"Kind of last minute!" she repeated in outraged disbelief. "Nick, this isn't like asking a girl out for burgers and a movie. I'm not exactly dressed for a night at the ballet."

"We'll swing by your apartment, I'm sure you'll find something," he laughed.

"Honestly, Knight, you really are too much."

"Does that mean you'll come?" He offered one of his most hopeful smiles and waited. She threw her baseball cap at him; he snatched it out of the air and let the smile escalate to a grin. "I'll meet you outside."

\*

The performance was as enthralling as he'd hoped, and once it had begun, Natalie had rapidly lost interest in harassing him for his lack of advance notice in asking her to attend with him.

"Who is she?"

Nick shook off the melancholy mood that had settled over him during the final act and refocused on the lovely woman beside him. "Who?"

"The pretty one you've been watching all night," she answered, a tiny edge of terseness in her tone.

Nick picked up the brittle note and he reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. He kissed her fingers and grinned.

"I have not been watching anyone 'all night', I'll have you know," he said with mock severity. "It's been a long time since I saw a ballet, and I was enjoying it."

"So I just imagined that rapt expression every time she was on stage," Natalie remarked, disbelief and a hint of uncertainty in her softened voice.

Nick knew he wasn't going to be let off the hook without an explanation, not with Natalie's curiosity in high gear. He opened the programme book and quickly spotted the name he sought. He glanced down at the stage, hidden behind the massive curtain. She was still in the wings. He could feel her there.

"Nick?"

"Her name is Arabella Devaine," he told Natalie. "Why don't we go backstage and pay our compliments?"

"She wasn't that impressive," Natalie commented. "Which leads me to ask, again, who is she, Nick?"

"I told you—"

"You've told me nothing," Natalie corrected before he could stall her further.

"She reminds me of someone, Nat," he finally admitted. "Not in how she looks, but..." His voice trailed, and he tried to find words that didn't want to be found. He sighed heavily and rose. Natalie accepted the arm he offered to her and she walked with him as they headed down to the stage level. Nick clearly knew his way around theatres, so she simply followed without question.

"She reminds you of the last woman you killed, doesn't she?"

The enquiry was gentle, but it hit Nick with the impact of a solid blow to his stomach. He spun, too quickly, and was momentarily shaken when Natalie flinched away from him in reactive startlement.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "No, she doesn't." He thought about it, and shook his head. "Yes, you're right. I think. I just don't know, Nat."

She couldn't mistake the pain in his voice, the disjointed way in which he'd tried to put the sentences together. "I'm sorry, Nick. I had no right."

Nick smiled and slipped his arms around her. She moved into the embrace and her head rested under his chin.

"Let's go," he suggested a few moments later.

"I think we should stop by and pay our compliments," Natalie returned when she stepped back and stared up at him.

Nick recognised the determination in her lovely brown eyes, and he accepted the inevitable. He nodded and they made their way to the back of the stage.

\*

Arabella's head rose at the light tap on her dressing room door. She was about to stand when a tiny figure darted past her and reached for the knob. In spite of herself, the dancer laughed softly at the giggling child, then turned to watch as the door was opened.

"Yes?"

Natalie grinned broadly at the cherubic face that beamed up at them. Blonde curls fell in waves over the small shoulders and bright hazel eyes danced with excitement as the little girl waited for their response.

Nick dropped to one knee and looked the child in the eyes, his smile softened with delight but appropriately sincere.

"We would like to speak with Miss Devaine," he told the suddenly sombre girl. She was taking this 'responsibility' very seriously. "My name is Nicholas Knight, and this is my friend Natalie Lambert."

The door swung open wider and the little girl's smile became a bright ray of sunshine as her mother scooped her up and hugged her. Nick rose and met Arabella Devaine's dark eyes. The instant of contact jolted him, and again he wasn't sure what it was about her that created such a strong response in him.

"It is very kind of you stop by, Mr. Knight, Miss Lambert," Arabella said, her eyes locked intently with Nick's. She held the hypnotic blue gaze for several moments before she stepped aside to admit them to the small dressing room. "I rarely have visitors," she explained. "Most of the people who wish to speak to the company are anxious to see Clarissa." Clarissa Adams was the Prima Ballerina, and the star of the current production of *Sleeping Beauty*.

"She's yours?" Natalie asked, her smile warm as she touched the soft blonde of the little girl's hair.

"This is Holly," Arabella told them. "And, yes, she is mine."

Holly leaned close to her mother and whispered something that made the dancer laugh in delight.

"She thinks you are very handsome, Mr. Knight," Arabella told Nick. When Holly's outraged "Mother!" brought laughter from all the adults, she squirmed until she was set back on her feet.

"Would you like to have a drink with us?" Nick asked when Arabella had gestured for them to sit.

"Thank you, but no," she answered, peering at them in the mirror as she finished removing her makeup. She'd already donned street clothes, and ran a brush through her hair once she'd tossed aside the last sticky tissue. When she turned to face them fully again, Holly came to a halt next to her.

"Do you come to the ballet often? I don't think I've ever seen you before," Arabella remarked.

There was another knock at the door, and Holly again went to answer the summons. This time her small face was not wreathed in smiles when she looked back at her mother.

"It's David," she informed Arabella, a surprising amount of ice in her child's voice.

He didn't wait for an invitation, simply pushed past the annoyed child and entered the cramped dressing room.

"I didn't realise you had company," he said when he spotted her visitors.

"You didn't give us time to tell you," Holly piped up, and again there was a tone in her voice that was very unchildlike.

"Holly! Hush," Arabella admonished gently. "Where are your manners?"

"Why should I have manners, when he has none?" the girl challenged.

"Why don't you leave her with a sitter like the other girls do?" David snapped.

"Why don't you stop behaving like you are no older than my daughter?" Arabella replied with forced friendliness. "Was there a reason for your call, David, or were you merely hoping to upset Holly?"

"Damn it, Arabella!"

Nick stepped into the building conflict. "I think we should be going," he offered when Natalie joined him and waited.

"Please don't."

He looked down at the small girl, startled by her request.

"This is Nicholas Knight, and Natalie Lambert," Arabella spoke up quickly. "David Marks, the lead in tonight's performance."

"I thought you looked familiar," Natalie smiled and extended her hand. He shook it, then eyed Nick when the other man simply watched him. Marks made no attempt to acknowledge the introduction with more than a nod of his head. "You were wonderful," Nat added. Her puzzled gaze darted to Nick, then she turned a bright smile to the dancer.

"Thank you," David accepted the compliment easily. He was used to women flattering him and trying to engage his interest.

"I think we will join you, Mr. Knight," Arabella decided. Holly's face lit up and she reached for Nick's hand. "Behave yourself! You are not Mr. Knight's date, and I am sure Natalie has no wish to share him with an impertinent miss like you." She couldn't quite maintain the proper sternness and Holly grinned at her.

"You're spoiling her rotten, Bella," David interjected, his tone revealing more than slight irritation.

"She is mine to spoil as I wish," Arabella responded quietly. "Now, if you will excuse us, we were about to leave."

"I wanted to know if you would join the company at the reception?"

"I was not invited, David."

"I'm asking you, Bella."

"As I said, we have plans," she closed the subject with her tone and he scowled at her.

"As you wish!"

Moments later, he'd left them.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that," she apologised to the two uncomfortable visitors.

"He's always rude," Holly said with a hint of petulance.

Arabella sighed inwardly. Her daughter generally loved people of all types, but she had taken a very strong dislike to David Marks from the moment they'd met. As ardent a dislike to him as her immediate fondness for Nicholas Knight.

"If you continue to behave like this, Mr. Knight will insist that we leave you behind," Arabella warned her defiant child.

"No, he won't," Holly disagreed. She moved closer to Nick and laughed when Natalie's giggles became audible.

Nick grinned at the ladies and bent to pick up the delightful girl. Holly looked closely at him, and he was left with the eerie impression that a child of less than five years had just read his heart. A satiny hand brushed his cheek and he was startled when an equally soft mouth placed a light kiss there.

"She does like you," Arabella told him thoughtfully. "I've never seen her do that before."

"Nick has a way with women," Natalie teased. "C'mon, let's chaperon their first date."

Nick rolled his eyes and grinned broadly. After Holly's jacket was retrieved and Nick had helped her into it, the laughing detective led the way out of the theatre.

\*

"He's so lonely," Holly said to her mother a couple of hours later when Arabella tucked her into bed.

"How could you possibly know such a thing?" Arabella scolded mildly. "You are behaving very oddly, my darling. Even for you."

"He is!" Holly insisted. "Don't you see it when he looks at you?"

"Holly! That's enough."

"Don't be mad at me, Mommy," the child pleaded, genuinely upset by the glitter of tears in her mother's eyes. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Arabella soothed quickly. She wiped away the tears that stained her cheeks and bent to kiss her daughter. "Detective Knight is very nice, Holly. But you worry me sometimes."

"Why?"

"You are so old for one so young, my love," she smiled. "And I would die without you."

"No, you'd have Nick."

Startled and genuinely distressed by the calm assertion, Arabella chose to say nothing else. She turned off the lamp next to Holly's bed, kissed the silky curls again, then headed for her own bed. She slept very little, her thoughts crowded with indefinable fears, and disturbingly seductive images of the fair-haired man she'd just met.

\*

"Hi!"

Arabella whirled at the familiar voice and Holly's delighted "Nick!" was quickly followed by a frantic rush for his arms. Arabella shook her head when the smiling police officer lifted the child and swung her around before kissing her.

"You weren't in the audience tonight," Arabella noted when her gaze took in his casual attire. "So what brings you to the theatre after a show?"

"You," he answered with honesty that had surprised him when he allowed himself to accept that he wanted to continue seeing her.

Holly's "I told you" look was wasted when Arabella's eyes remained firmly fixed on Nicholas.

"I thought we could go for a walk," he suggested. "It's my night off."

"And you know we walk every evening!" Holly was delighted. She hugged his neck and turned imploring eyes to her mother. "Can we go with Nick?"

Arabella felt a distinct sense of dread. She liked Nick, very much, but she was acutely aware of how easy it would be to rely on his presence. She had promised herself that Holly would never feel cheated because she had no father, but that goal had been overshadowed by the genuine affection her daughter felt for the attractive detective. Holly talked of little else since meeting Nick and Natalie.

"You haven't brought Natalie with you?" Arabella questioned, conscious of the guilt she felt when she remembered the longing she'd glimpsed in Natalie's eyes when the doctor looked at Nick.

"She's working," he replied, his blue gaze thoughtful and searching. "If I've picked a bad night—

"No!" Holly objected.

"Holly, we shouldn't—"

"It's not an imposition, Arabella," Nicholas assured her in a gentle tone. "I enjoy our visits. But, if it is a bad time..." He directed this part of his statement to the child in his arms. "Then I do understand. We can go for a walk another time."

Before she could form a response, there was a tap at her door. "They want you on stage, Arabella. Rehearsal."

"At this hour?" She tried but was unsuccessful in keeping the annoyance from her voice.

"Five minutes," the stagehand told her with a shrug. "Want me to watch her?"

Holly waited, her small arms wrapped tightly around Nick's neck.

"Why don't you let me take her for a few hours?" Knight asked. He smiled at Holly. "We can find lots of stuff to do, can't we?"

Holly wasn't going to commit to anything without her mother's approval. She looked at Arabella, hazel eyes far more serious than her five years should have permitted them to be.

"Do you want to go with Nick?"

Holly nodded.

"It's decided then." He kissed her cheek and set her down so she could collect her jacket and hug her mother. "She'll be fine," Nick reassured her, though some part of him knew it was an unnecessary statement. "We'll come back and pick you up in...?"

"About an hour," she supplied. "I can't imagine that it will be much longer than that. This 'rehearsal' is probably just a run through for the new girls. We've acquired three new dancers for the chorus," she explained with a wry grin. "Don't let her get away with too much."

"No more than you," Nick quipped with a smirk.

"Then I'm afraid you're sunk, Detective!" Arabella returned in the same tone. She dropped to her knees, zipped up Holly's jacket and hugged her. "Do what Nick asks, and don't be a pest."

"I'm never a pest," Holly indignantly informed her mother. "Except with you," she giggled. She kissed her mother and the three headed out of the dressing room.

\*

Arabella was exhausted when she opened the door and led Nick into her small apartment. He carried Holly, who slept soundly in his arms. Arabella motioned to the bedroom at the end of the short hallway, and he headed down the shadowed passage. It took them only a few minutes to undress the little girl and tuck her into bed. She managed to wake long enough to kiss Nick and say "good-night" to them.

"I hope she wasn't too much trouble," Arabella said once they were seated in the living room. She ran her hands through the shoulder-length waves of her dark hair. "I really didn't expect Paul's rehearsal to run three hours."

"I didn't mind," he told her with a smile. "She's great company."

"God! Don't tell her that, please?" Her smile was filled with pride and mild exasperation.

"Like her mother," he added quietly.

Arabella looked closely at the golden-haired detective, surprised but pleased by the compliment he'd just paid her. "Thank you," she whispered. "Holly has talked about you non-stop since you first came to the theatre, Nick."

"Thank you," he nodded. His smile grew exaggerated and they laughed quietly. He saw the weariness in her eyes and rose a few moments later. "I should be going. It's late, and I know you're tired."

"I am," she admitted. "But I don't really want you to go."

"I'll stop by in a couple of days," he promised.

Arabella rose with him and as he turned to walk toward the door, she stopped him with a tentative hold on his arm. He swung around and blue eyes met dark, the curiosity immediate. Summoning up her courage, Arabella slid her arms around his waist and kissed the corner of his jaw.

"You've made her so happy, Nick. I'm very grateful for that."

"You make her happy, Arabella," he murmured, and held her tighter. He turned his face into the silkiness of her hair and closed his eyes. He loved the way she felt next to him, and he hated that he would have to push her away much too soon. He ran his hands along the gentle curve of her back and tugged her closer, hips moulding naturally to the slender body pressed to his. She eased back from his shoulder just enough to meet his eyes. He felt her warm breath against his chin. When the tip of her tongue caressed his bottom lip, he opened his mouth and drew her into a deep kiss.

\*

"I've never felt like this before," Arabella confessed, her voice shaken. They'd dragged themselves back into the living room between frenzied kisses and eager explorations of each other. Nick was stretched over her, the soft cushion of the carpet beneath them as she stared up into his glittering sapphire eyes.

"I should go," he whispered. He didn't want to leave. Dawn was very near — too near for real comfort.

"You're welcome to stay," she assured him.

"I can't, Arabella."

She tried not to let her hurt touch him.

"Please," he murmured and pressed his forehead against her neck. "It's not you. I want to stay. More than you know."

The words hardly registered in her mind. She wanted to be reasonable. Be adult. Had she fallen in love with him so quickly? Some part of her knew the answer, and she suppressed it. The denial was agony. She twisted very slowly out of his embrace, pained further when he made no attempt to prevent her escape.

Arabella pulled her knees up to her chest as she watched him roll into a sitting position across from her.

"You owe me no explanations, Nicholas," she offered with a small smile. "We do not know each other well enough for that."

His gaze moved to the patio doors, and the hint of rose that tainted the skyline warned him that he was rapidly running out of time to leave.

"It's late, Nicholas," Arabella whispered. "I'm sorry, I should not have kept you."

"I work nights, remember?" he assured her with a smile that was tinged with melancholy. "I'm used to never seeing the sun."

Something in his tone drew her, touched her heart with a deep, haunting sadness. She tried to find an answer in his beautiful eyes, but he refused to allow her to look too closely. She accepted his choice without comment, and made a decision of her own.

"Would you rather the couch or my bed?"

He laughed. She assumed he intended to stay after all. "And where will you sleep?" he wondered.

"Where my guest does not wish to," she inclined her head in a tiny bow.

"I'll take the couch," he replied. "Can you draw the blinds?"

"This place looks like a dungeon throughout most days," she mused quietly as she darkened the room. "It's not at all fair to Holly. I just can't bear to have her with babysitters all day while I sleep. We started staying up late from the time she was two." She turned glistening dark eyes to him and shrugged. "She knows more about the theatre than many people who work there."

"Holly is a very lucky little girl," Nick told her and reached for her hands. She sat next to him on the couch then leaned into his shoulder.

"Before you, she was the only blessing my life had ever known, Nicholas."

He'd been called many things in his long life, but he had never thought to be considered a Blessing by anyone. With a smile that disguised the tears he could feel within his heart, Nick kissed her temple and held her close as the sun rose outside the dim, shadowy apartment.

\*

It had been days since Nick had found time to stop by the theatre and see Arabella. Holly had called him at home, and he still felt a surge of warmth when he recalled her delighted voice leaving a message on his machine. In less than two weeks, the little girl had fallen as deeply in love as her mother had, the difference being simply that Holly was able to tell him openly that she loved him. Arabella told him with every look she cast in his direction, and every touch she offered him when they were together.

His shift was just beginning when the call came in. Schanke met him at the squad room door and promptly turned him around before he'd gotten anywhere near his desk.

"We just got a call from Arabella Devaine," Schanke informed him once they were enroute. "Her daughter's missing."

Nick's stomach lurched and he turned panicked eyes to his partner. "Missing! What does that mean, Schank?"

"It means she's not there, Nick," Schanke tried to keep the tone considerate. Natalie had told him how much the kid and her mother meant to Knight. "It's probably nothing. Her mother probably flipped out prematurely."

"Arabella's not the kind of woman who flips out, Schanke," Nick responded softly. He searched his heart, found an answer he wasn't prepared to accept, and tried desperately to believe that Holly was safe.

\*

"Nicholas!"

He caught her and held her in a hug that threatened to break her ribs. Arabella was oblivious to the strength in his arms as the tears she'd been fighting began to fall. She clung to him and he attempted to soothe her fear despite his own sense of loss.

"Ms. Devaine?"

Schanke didn't want to intrude, but they needed answers only the child's mother could supply them with, and Knight didn't seem able to ask them just then.

"Schanke, give me a minute?" Nick requested quietly.

For a second, the other detective wanted to object, then he nodded, his compassion genuine.

"Take your time, Nick," his partner replied. He'd only seen a brief glimpse into Arabella's eyes as she ran to Knight, but it was enough to remind him of how much he loved Jenny — and of how devastated he and Myra would be if anything ever happened to their daughter.

"Tell me what happened, *bien-aimée*?" Nick slipped in the French endearment without thought, his native tongue still the most natural when he was shaken.

"I left her in the dressing room, with Gwen. She wanted to watch the show, and I wouldn't allow it. She distracts me." Her hands knotted in his jacket and she shuddered with the intensity of her misery. "My God! I made her stay away from the stage so I wouldn't have to watch her."

Nick felt the pain that radiated from her. He pulled her head from his shoulder and made her face him.

"She has been safe in this theatre every night she's been here, Arabella. This is not your fault!"

"There's nothing, Nicholas," she told him, dark eyes huge with fright. "No sign that she's ever been here."

"What about Gwen?"

"She's with David. We found her in the room, tied up and unconscious."

"Schanke?"

"Yeah, what is it, Nick?"

"Gwendolyn Thompson was looking after her. You'll find her with David Marks, the lead dancer."

Once his partner had gone to speak with the babysitter, Nick gently directed Arabella to a stairwell that led up to the stage. It was the only semi-private area available to them. While he kept one hand on Arabella's shoulder in an effort to calm her, he flipped open a cellular phone and placed the call that would bring a Forensics team to the theatre and start the formal investigation.

\*

"You want me to believe that you didn't see anything that might help us identify who took Holly?" Schanke's voice all but dripped sarcasm as he waited for an answer. So far, Gwendolyn had given him nothing. David Marks hovered at her back, his eyes dark and watchful. Anger radiated from the dancer.

"It is the truth, Detective..."

"Schanke," Don supplied for the third time. "Look, I know this is a busy place, but from what you've told me, Holly was the only kid here tonight."

"Holly is the only child here every night," David remarked sourly. "I've told Arabella repeatedly to leave the girl with a sitter and save us the—"

"Save you the what, David?" A furious voice interrupted.

Schanke glanced at the door and saw his partner's attempt to curb Arabella's anger. It wasn't working.

"Save you the trouble of having to behave like a human being? Or is that you didn't have the opportunity to berate me properly when my daughter was around?" Arabella dragged in a deep breath that should have calmed her wrath — it didn't help. "Damn you! Just who the hell do you think you are, David?"

"Bella, you're upset, understandably so. There's no reason to take this out on me."

"There's every reason, you bastard!" she charged.

Nick and Schanke looked at each other, each wondering what it was that made the relationship between the two dancers such an antagonistic one. Knight pulled her into his arms again, and felt the ripple of jealous rage his action created within Marks. Arabella's voice near his ear drew his gaze from the angry dancer.

"We have to find her, Nicholas."

Nick kissed her forehead and drew her back into the hallway.

"What's going on between you and Marks?"

"Nothing," she replied quickly. "Nicholas, I wouldn't lie to you. You must believe that."

He did.

"Who would want to hurt you?"

She shrugged and eased away from him. She paced a few steps, then turned stricken eyes to the uneasy blue of his stare.

"I have no one, Nick," she whispered. "Holly is the only love I have ever had in my life."

"We'll find her, Arabella," he vowed. "I'll find her, I promise you that."

Arabella felt the truth in his words, and in that instant recognised the nature of their meaning. She drew back, shaken to her soul, and clutched the wall for a support she knew she would never again find anywhere. Nick caught her as she fainted.

\*

"The report is back from Forensics," Schanke informed him and tossed the folder onto Knight's desk as the blond detective sat. "I'll make it brief," he continued. "Nothing. Nada. No prints, no sign of forced entry into the dressing room, no sign of the kid putting up a struggle."

Nick glanced over the page, confirmed what his partner was voicing, and leaned back as Natalie entered the squad room. She immediately headed for them.

"How's Arabella?" she asked once she'd perched on the end of Nick's desk.

"She hasn't said a word in two days," Nick told her. "She hasn't spoken to anyone since the night Holly disappeared."

"Not even you?" The lovely coroner tried to keep the surprise in her voice to a minimum, but enough scepticism crept through to make Knight glare at her. "I'm sorry," she added instantly. "But you've gotten so close, I just thought..."

Nick stood, and his voice when he spoke again was low and icy with anger. "No, you didn't, Nat. If you'd thought at all you would have heard me the first time."

He walked away before either of them could utter a word. Natalie stared after him, shock and hurt clearly etched into her features. She stared helplessly at Schanke, who shook his head and went to find his partner.

\*

Less than a week later, one aspect of the nightmare ended. They were cruising the streets in search of a robbery suspect when Nick caught the call. It was only a few blocks away. Schanke reached for the radio and Knight pulled the Caddy into a sidestreet that would take them to the proper address in minutes.

\*

"Where's the body?" Nick's eyes were everywhere as he sought for some source for the uneasy feeling that had settled in the pit of his stomach.

"In here," Natalie announced when she heard his voice. She stepped out of the side entrance and halted him before he could go inside. "I don't think you want to see this one, Nick."

His eyes narrowed and fear brushed the back of his neck like an icy finger.

"Why?" As he spoke the single word, he realised that he didn't want an answer.

"She fell down a flight of stairs," Natalie said quietly. "The landing is made of solid concrete, Nick."

"Who is it, Nat?"

Schanke's hand tightened on his partner's shoulder as he came to a halt behind Knight.

"I think you already know," the lovely doctor murmured as tears slipped from the corners of her huge brown eyes.

"No." It was barely audible, a shocked expulsion of air that escaped him without notice. It took a moment, then he jerked away from the quiet empathy of his friends. For that brief instant, he almost allowed the vampire to emerge and fly from the agony that awaited him in the shadowed foyer. Schanke made a second grab at him, but Knight easily evaded the grip. He was inside before they knew what else to do to stop him.

Nick dropped to his knees and gathered the tiny form into his arms. His teeth clenched and new anguish assailed him when Holly's small head lolled at a grotesque angle. He pulled her closer to his chest and felt his heart breaking within him. Natalie silently knelt behind him and rested her head against his shoulder as she tried to offer him some tiny comfort.

\*

Arabella looked up at the quiet knock, and her eyes peered at the wood panel as if she could see the presence on the other side. It wasn't necessary, of course. She knew who it was. Nick's call had told her he would be arriving within fifteen minutes. It had been ten since the machine had taken the message.

She rose, took a deep breath, and walked to the door, then opened it to admit the attractive detective. She said nothing, and followed him into the living room.

Nick looked around. It was so familiar, the slight disarray of a lived-in home. Holly's face smiled at him from a gilt-edged frame on the desk. Pain blurred his vision again.

Arabella stepped in front of him and gazed up with a lost expression in her deep eyes. She hesitated for several long moments, then nodded. When she would have turned away, Nick enfolded her in his arms. Her entire body shook next to his, and he absorbed the waves of heart-wrenching agony that assaulted her as she fought to accept that her daughter was dead.

The silence of her anguish was eerie.

\*

"You're becoming obsessed with this, Nick!"

Holly Devaine had been dead over a month, and her mother was no longer living in Toronto. She'd slipped away without a word, and Nick had promptly set about tracking her whereabouts. He knew now that she had moved east. The Ballet had released her from her contract without much fuss. Nick had all but thrown David Marks across the room when he'd pointed out that the mute dancer was more like a walking corpse than a woman capable of displaying the passion her art required.

"It's my obsession then, Schank," Nick snapped softly. "What have you found?" he demanded when a uniformed officer stopped at his desk.

"We located Mayer's new apartment, Detective. She's been there for almost a month."

"Thanks, Lawlor," Knight smiled and took the proffered report from the young cop.

"Mayer?" Schanke said.

"Lorna Mayer," Nick complied with the information his partner hadn't yet asked for. "She was working at the Theatre the night Holly was taken."

"Then why weren't we given her name?"

"Because then she was Lorna Carroll, and a part-time casual employee with a cleaning firm."

"You think she had something to do with the kidnapping? That's a stretch, Knight."

"Is it?" Nick challenged. "She was in love with David Marks at the time."

Schanke jumped to his feet when Nick rose and headed from the squad room. Don followed his partner out to the Caddy and climbed in as Nick twisted the key in the ignition.

"You're still not making much sense with this, Nick."

"She took Holly, Schank," Knight assured his partner. "I can feel it."

"Why?" the other man questioned, and turned earnest eyes to the blond man. "Listen, Knight. I know this has been rough on you, losing Holly and Arabella. But, there's nothing to link this woman or Marks—"

"I think David Marks was Holly's father, Don."

"What?" Schanke was clearly surprised by that revelation. He remembered vividly the tension between the two dancers the night of the little girl's disappearance.

"Call it a hunch," Nick replied.

\*

"Ms. Mayer?" Schanke was poised on one side of the door, and he glanced across at his anxious partner. Knight looked like he wanted to kill something, and that uncharacteristic anger worried Don.

"Metro Police, Lorna," Knight called out. "Open the door." He listened closely and suddenly ran for the stairs. "She's on her way down to the back entrance, Schanke."

Schanke slammed his shoulder against the door and the frame splintered then gave way completely. He burst into the apartment and headed down the hall for the open door at the rear. He could hear the sharp click of heels on the stairs. In that moment, he knew Nick's instinct had been right.

Don headed down the stairs, taking them two at a time as he tried to catch the woman before his partner reached her. He wasn't entirely sure Knight wouldn't pop the woman just on principle — not that he would blame him, under the circumstances.

\*

Nick waited and heard the pounding heartbeat getting closer to him with each second that passed. Her thoughts were chaotic and frightened. He knew as she neared that she wasn't fully responsible for the child's death; Lorna wasn't truly capable of murder. His rage blossomed, then died as he forced himself to still the desire to take her life as payment for Holly's. The memory of the little girl's innocent face took away his thirst for retribution.

Lorna stumbled to a halt in front of him, her eyes wild with fear when she spotted the gun in his hand. She whirled away and was met with the immovable presence of Schanke at her back.

\*

"How much time do you need?"

Nick looked at the concerned face of Joe Stonetree and he offered his superior a sad smile.

"I know where to find her, Captain," he said quietly. "I just need a couple of days."

"Tell her..." He paused, then tried again. "Tell her how sorry we are."

"I will, Captain. Thanks."

Knight turned and reached for the door knob.

"How are you handling all this, Nick?"

"It'll be fine," the detective assured his boss as he glanced back. "The hardest part is knowing that it was an accident, and accepting that there was nothing I could have done."

"She's sick, Nick. She has been for a long time."

"Yeah, and she's just gotten away with murder. It doesn't seem fair, Captain."

"It isn't," the older man agreed. "What happened with Marks?"

"Nothing," Nick answered. "He barely recognised Lorna, and he's never known about Holly. It had to have been a lucky guess for Lorna to know, or she saw something that made her think he was Holly's father. I just don't know." He sighed heavily, and looked at Stonetree for several moments. The companionship was welcome. He left without another word.

\*

Night had deepened with the passage of unnoticed hours. It had been a glorious evening, filled with pastel shades of rose and peach. Scarlet ribbons had gradually stained the velvety purple that slowly replaced the clear blue that had dominated the entire day. Now, the world lay blanketed beneath a heavy cloak of inky darkness, studded with the icy white brilliance of sparkling stars.

A low-slung crescent moon added its sliver of radiance to the scape of beauty that stretched above her.

Pain.

There was so much pain now. Life had taken on a dreamlike tone since her little girl had been torn from her by the cruel wrath of a God she no longer believed in. Holly had been only five years old; what could a child possibly have done to deserve death before she had experienced life? There were no tears left, they'd been cried a lifetime ago. All that remained was the empty core of her existence, the shell of a life that no longer held meaning or purpose.

Was it the loneliness that tormented her soul? Or merely the sense of being set adrift to search for something that didn't truly survive such losses? Bitter laughter rose within her but never emerged from the silence she'd retreated into. Arabella Devaine hadn't uttered a sound since the handsome young detective she'd fallen in love with had given her the confirmation of both their fears — the news of her daughter's death. It seemed futile to try and offer any explanation or discourse of something that had so irrevocably changed the cycle of her life.

Nick had been so kind, and she had appreciated his gentleness, but she had been unable to answer even the simplest of questions. The light within her had been extinguished by a darkness more complete than the one which presently surrounded her. He'd understood that as well, and she knew he'd shared her pain to some extent.

She rose from the park bench and walked the tree-lined paths without conscious awareness. She'd done this so often she no longer needed to watch her progress. Arabella could determine exactly where she was by the subtle shifts of scent and the ripples of sound that drifted to her as she strolled.

It was cold. That realisation startled her. It had been such a warm day, for late September. Halifax rarely experienced hot days at this time of year. Now, there was an unmistakable chill in the still air. She noted the change, did nothing, and stared at the glass-like surface of the lake that housed swans and ducks in abundance. She stepped foot on the small stone bridge and leaned against the broad grey rail. Holly would have loved this place, she thought with a ghost of smile. Perhaps if she'd left Toronto sooner...

"You can't second guess every choice you've ever made."

Arabella whirled at the soft, beloved voice. She was genuinely startled to find herself staring into deep blue eyes that reflected the sadness in her soul. She remained silent and stood straighter as the golden-haired man walked toward her. When he stood next to her, she waited, lost in the sadness that emanated from his beautiful eyes.

"It's peaceful here," he noted as he looked outward and a smile touched the generous curve of his mouth.

Arabella smiled gently and hooked her arm through his. The expression deepened when he covered her hand with his and they shared the impossible quiet of this haven. The sounds of the city were distant from this spot, muted by the fading but still vast beauty of the Gardens.

"We found the woman who took her, Arabella."

She'd heard about the arrest on the news. Her dark eyes rose to meet the cautious gaze that she knew had settled on her. The tears she had been sure she'd never feel again made her vision blur and the Gardens seemed to swim within a cloud of agony that turned the night to deeper darkness. She felt the solid stone of the bridge fall from beneath her as, for only the second time in her life, her consciousness slipped away.

\*

"I'm sorry."

The concern was sincere. She could feel it in the anxious strain that made his faint accent more pronounced. She reached for the hand that stroked her hair and opened her eyes to look upward. She wanted desperately to make her voice work. It had been so long since she'd needed to speak. Blue eyes locked with hers and she turned to kiss his palm.

"Thank you, Nicholas," she whispered. The sound was so alien to her after the long weeks of silence. Her voice felt rusty, and tremulous from its lack of use.

He pulled her into his arms. "I'm so sorry," he repeated.

She leaned into the comfort he offered, and Nick allowed his thoughts to search backward to the night he'd met Arabella Devaine. She'd been a dancer with the Royal Canadian Ballet, not one of their best, nor was she particularly beautiful. But, she had an aura about her that enchanted him in much the way another dancer had, almost a century ago. Arabella's child was, to Nick, the very embodiment of innocence and beauty. Even now, he couldn't escape the feeling that he should have been able to prevent what had happened to Holly.

"You can't second guess every choice you've ever made."

His thoughts were abruptly snapped back to the present by the words, and he looked down into her red-rimmed eyes.

"Sometimes, it's impossible not to," he replied.

She smiled and nodded. "But it is not something which is in any way productive, is it?" As before, her quiet voice sounded rough and raw with emotion.

"Where are you staying?" Nick asked. "I'll take you home."

For a moment, she continued to stare through the stone rungs of the bridge, and the water reflected tiny flares of white light back into her heart — the stars had emerged.

"How did you know where to find me, Nick?"

He was silent for several moments then he sighed quietly. "I've kept track of you. I wanted to tell you in person when we found Holly's killer. I think I owed you both that much."

"You owed us nothing," she assured him. "But I thank you for your compassion and your humanity."

"Humanity?" He felt a stab of bitter pain lodge in his chest. "Why would you chose that word?"

"Because it is the most appropriate for what you've done," she whispered. "You could easily have assumed I would hear the news. You gave Holly such joy, Nick. In the few weeks that she knew you, she talked of little else."

"She was a very special child."

"She was born old, Nicholas. I think she sensed that you, too, were old beyond your outward appearance."

"More than you know," he agreed. He rose from the uncomfortable stone and drew Arabella to her feet. "Where?"

"South Street, not far from here," she told him and linked her arm through his again. "It's not a long walk."

Nick accepted her choice, then drew her under his arm. He kissed the top of her head when she curled closer into his neck and her right hand slid inside his jacket to rest at his waist. She felt right in his arms, and he tightened his hold as they passed beneath the wrought-iron gates that arched above them to form the park entrance.

\*

"How do you like living in Halifax?"

Arabella turned away from the huge window that dominated one wall of the living room. He had come to stand next to her and she was captivated by the gentleness in his features. She hadn't really allowed herself to think about him in so long, Nick was incredibly handsome she rediscovered. Holly had thought him Prince Charming come to life, much more so than David Marks, who had been playing that role in the ballet when they'd first met Nick. Holly had never known that the dancer she had so uncharacteristically disliked was her father.

"It's a more relaxed place than Toronto," she said when she realised she'd been staring too openly. "I've taken a teaching position. I think I'll stay for awhile."

"I'll miss you," he admitted. "That's funny, isn't it? We hardly knew each other, but I've missed you during the past month."

"Not so funny," she shrugged. "I've missed you as well. Holly was determined that we should see each other more," she laughed.

Nick shared her laughter, easily envisioning the precocious five year old presenting her opinion to her mother. He found he wasn't at all averse to the proposed friendship. Arabella was not an exceptionally alluring woman, but something about her quiet loveliness touched Nick. She was fragile, yet strong, delicate but resilient as well. She reminded him of Janette, he suddenly realised. Nothing in her face, but something very much within her soul. She was as he had always sensed his first real love to have been in her mortal lifespan.

Arabella had watched the shift of emotion that transformed his sapphire eyes to a myriad of sky-coloured hues. Blue had so many subtle shades and nuances, and Nick's eyes were like an ever-changing pool of water that threw back the beauty above it. She saw the understanding that had deepened sapphire to indigo, and with the revelation of his thoughts came a vision of his heart.

"Who is she?"

Nick blinked and shook his head. Arabella winked at him and hooked her fingers through the belt loops on his jeans.

"The lady in your heart," she elaborated. "Is it Natalie?"

"No," he confessed, and felt a twinge of guilt at the truth.

"Ah... An old love."

"Janette," he whispered. "She was...is..." He took a deep breath and tried again. "Janette was the first woman I loved, and we remain friends. Sometimes, I wonder what it would have been like..."

"To have stayed with her?"

He tapped her nose lightly and his smile was filled with mild reproach. "You ask too many questions."

"Or is that you answer too many of my questions?" Arabella challenged with a grin.

"A little of both, I think," he said. "Who was Holly's father?" He had suspicions, but he wanted them confirmed.

Arabella hesitated as her eyes searched the planes and angles of his perfect features, memorised the contours and smooth textures. She wanted very badly to touch him, but some part of her was afraid to again take that fateful first step.

"He was a dancer," she gradually confided when she recalled his query. "David Marks. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Nick smiled. He didn't answer her query, knew it wasn't necessary. "Does he know?" He knew that too, but needed to hear the words from her lips.

"No," she shook her head, felt the old pain tweak at her heart. She subdued the threat with real effort and started to step back. To her surprise, Nick's hands on her shoulders held her where she was, then he drew her closer. She shivered when their bodies touched, the contact like a shock of electricity that wrapped around them and pulled them tighter to each other.

"I have never known love, Nick," she whispered quietly. "Not until the moment I held Holly in my arms. David was a mistake, I always knew that. Because he gave me Holly, I had no real regrets about our affair. But, I do regret that I have never known what it is to feel the passion I see in your eyes when you speak Janette's name."

"Janette is the farthest thing from my mind right now, Arabella," he said with quiet intensity. Before she could comment, he bent down to cover her mouth in a tentative kiss. Soft, full lips parted beneath his and he drew her deeper into the caress as her arms went around his waist and her hips merged with his. He felt the light flick of her tongue finding his and a low groan escaped him as he pulled her closer still and answered the probe with a hunger that made her tremble against him.

"Stay with me tonight, Nick?" Arabella breathed into his ear when his lips began a sensual discovery of the curve of her neck. She shuddered when she felt the light pressure of his tongue caress the hollow of her collarbone. She reached between them and tugged at the loose sweater she wore. The buttons slid open and a choked moan fell from her lips when Nick lifted her in his arms and his mouth closed firmly over the hardened tip of one nipple. Her fingers glided through the golden silk of his hair and she kissed the top of his head as she wrapped her legs around his waist. When he turned to lavish the same erotic attention on her second nipple, she arched against him.

Nick slowed the erratic pulse of his heartbeat and buried his face in the soft warmth of Arabella's breasts. He could feel the vampire waking and it frightened him. If they didn't put an end to this quickly, it would finish in disaster. Deeper than the fear was the desire he hadn't thought himself still capable of feeling. He wanted her, with an intensity that was in itself frightening — it had been what separated them months earlier.

"Nick?"

There was concern layered in the rough voice that demanded his attention, and he forced himself to look into her dark eyes.

"We shouldn't be doing this," he offered weakly.

"I know."

Arabella slid away from him as he set her on her feet. His eyes fastened on her heaving breasts and she felt another shudder run the length of her spine. Against every instinct she possessed, Arabella took his hands in hers and led him across the floor and into the bedroom. She hit the wall-switch on her way and the soft glow from the bedside lamps illuminated the room with faint light.

A queen-size bed was the centrepiece of the pale grey room. Dark walnut-finished antique dressers complemented the lighter colour of maple-stained night tables at either side of the bed, and the desk that stood in one corner. Full length patio doors led out onto a large stone balcony decorated with white wicker chairs and table. Cream coloured lace trimmed the beige satin coverlet on the bed, and matched the plush carpet that covered the entire floor.

Nick was transfixed by the longing in her eyes. He deliberately ignored the voice of his conscience as it tried to make him leave. Arabella had tossed aside the bed covers and was now stripping out of her clothes. A moment later she stood before him, hands extended in invitation. Nick slipped the gun and holster from his shoulders, set the weapon on the top of a dresser, then removed his own clothing. He took her hands as he stepped in front of her, and brought the small limbs to his lips, kissing first one palm then the other.

He scooped her into his arms and placed her in the centre of the bed as he stretched out over her. Dark eyes glowed into his and she smiled as she traced the curve of his smile.

"Tomorrow there will be plenty of time for regrets, Nick," she said softly. "Tonight I want to forget."

It was what he wanted as well. He nodded and hoped he'd be granted the small blessing.

Arabella slid her arms around him, her hands smoothing over the flawless length of his back. His mouth claimed hers and reawakened the passion that had devoured her reservations and demanded to be sated by Nick's possession. Her hips answered their own need, pushed into his as her legs entangled with Nick's long limbs. Her hands wandered freely, caressing and exploring with a boldness she'd never shown any man. Everything about Nick inflamed her, and she wanted to taste and touch every part of him, as he was presently discovering her.

He moved off her and she cried out in objection, unable to form words past the gasps for air that didn't come quickly enough to her lungs. His hands traced patterns of arousing touch along the inner softness of her thighs and she moaned loudly when the light caresses were matched by the teasing stroke of his tongue over her hipbones. She writhed in exquisite agony when his breath touched the silken skin his fingers had teased, then gentle lips grazed the hypersensitive core of her desire.

"Nick..."

The spell shattered abruptly when Nick suddenly jerked away and turned his back to her. Arabella rose and her arms went around his shaking shoulders. He tried to push her aside, but she refused to be dislodged.

"Nick! Please, tell me what's wrong?" She could barely push the words past the sudden anxiety that choked her voice.

"I can't."

She heard the animal-like growl that rumbled in his throat and she slid off the bed to kneel in front of him. Her hands clutched his as he finally looked down at her.

"This is what I am," he hissed.

Blue eyes had become green-gold fire, and fangs extruded in very genuine threat. Yet, despite the hunger in his gaze, Arabella felt the pain that emanated from him even more strongly. The momentary terror that had seized her receded rapidly, and was replaced by heartbreakng sadness.

"I am sorry, Nick," she whispered, unashamed of the tears that coursed down her cheeks. "I am so very sorry."

It was taking all his concentration to subdue the vampire, and Nick barely heard the hoarse words. His heart understood, and he shook his head in anguished hatred of what he had almost done to her. He knew better than to think he could be with a mortal woman. The trysts had always ended the same — he'd kill. He hadn't killed in almost a hundred years. He wanted to love someone and not destroy them — it wasn't possible.

"I'll leave," he gradually said. The hunger was still too close to the surface, and Arabella's heartbeat was too enticing. As appealing as her passion had been a short while ago.

"Why?" His eyes had become blue once again, and the fangs were no longer visible. She couldn't miss the flare of anger her question had evoked. "I have not asked you to leave. I don't *want* you to leave, Nick. I want you to talk to me about this."

"There's nothing to talk about!" Nick snapped. "I'm a vampire, Arabella. A killer. It's what I've been for eight hundred years."

"You're not a killer, Nick," she disagreed. "If you were, we wouldn't be having a conversation right now. You would have killed me already."

"I almost did! Don't you understand that?"

Arabella rose and went to her closet. She hauled out a robe, slipped it over her shoulders and belted it. When she turned back to him he was reaching for his jeans. She darted across the room and took the pants from him.

"Back into bed, Detective," she ordered with a smile.

"What?" He was too stunned by the directive to object when she pushed him backward until he fell onto the mattress.

"I'll behave myself, I promise," she teased. "Stay with me, Nick. Please?" Her dark eyes were suddenly serious. "I need you to be here, Nicholas."

He slid between the sheets, used the headboard as a brace for his back, and stared at her in open confusion. She sat next to his feet and drew her legs under her. In the large terry garment, she looked distinctly like a child lost in her father's bathrobe. She laced her fingers together in her lap and looked up at him.

"Holly said you needed someone to love you. I think now I understand why she felt that so strongly."

"She said that?" He shook his head in amazement.

"She used to say the same thing about me," Arabella offered with a whimsical tilt of her head.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Nick remarked wryly.

Arabella laughed in agreement.

"You've given me back something I never thought I would have again, Nicholas Knight," she told him a few moments later. When he waited for her to complete the statement, she gazed out into the clear night. "I was afraid to think about her, afraid to feel anything but the emptiness. I know she's at peace, Nick. You found the person who took her from me, and you've spared someone else that pain."

"I wish I'd never found her dead, Arabella," he said with sudden urgency. "I should have found her—"

"Don't, Nick! Please. Don't do this to either of us," she pleaded. "It won't change anything, and we've both been mired in pain for too long."

He accepted her words without comment, and silence settled over the room again. After a short time, Nick reached for her hand and drew her up beside him. When she was curled into his arms and her head rested against his shoulder, he sighed heavily.

"If you could have a single wish, what would you want, Nick?"

"Is this a game you played with Holly?" He smiled warmly, and his tone was indulgent.

"Sometimes," she admitted with a grin. "But, I would like an answer."

"What I want isn't possible," he replied evasively.

"All things are possible, Nick. You just have to want them badly enough, and believe."

"Faith."

"Sure." She eased away just enough to meet the dazzling blue of his eyes. "So what do you want most, my shining knight?"

"The sunrise," he whispered, as if merely voicing the desire would burn him to ash. He'd escaped his vampiric nature once this night, and that was all the miracle he felt he could be granted. He drew her back to his shoulder.

For a long time, she was quiet. Nick began to think she'd fallen asleep, and was startled when she did speak much later.

"I need for you to explain some things to me," she told him. When he didn't answer immediately, she straightened and turned so that she could face him squarely again. She took his hands in hers and squeezed tight, the grip a reflexive response to what she was afraid to speak.

"What is it you want to know?" Nick was wary, and he allowed the suspicion to taint his enquiry.

"I need for you to separate myth from actuality for me."

"About?" he prompted when she hesitated.

"About vampires, of course," she managed to keep the tone much lighter than she felt.

"This isn't a good idea," Nick stated softly.

"Probably not, but we've already ignored our good sense once tonight, so why not go for broke?" She leaned over and kissed him, the caress gentle and loving. "I am interested in one particular myth."

"Which one?"

"You don't seem to trust me, Detective Knight," she murmured.

"At the moment, I don't," he replied with a smile.

"Do vampires experience mental bonds with their..."

"Victims?" Nick offered in an attempt to dissuade her interest with the bluntness of the word.

"Fine," she allowed sharply. "With their victims?"

"Why?"

"You haven't answered my question yet."

"Sometimes, but it happens more frequently with someone who is being brought across."

"Does the person have to die to be bonded to the vampire?"

"Arabella, what the hell are you getting at?"

"Answer me, damn it!"

He paused and looked closely at her. His answer was important to her, though he couldn't begin to fathom why it should be.

"No, not if the two people involved already feel a certain kind of closeness."

"Do we share that closeness, Nick?"

They did, but he wasn't entirely sure confirming it was in his best interests just then. Apparently he didn't have to acknowledge it; she nodded in response to some affirmation he'd unconsciously given her.

"I want to give you a gift, Nicholas. Something as precious as the one you've given me tonight."

Her tone was serious, and the love that shone from her deep brown eyes was undeniable. He pulled her close and kissed the tangle of hair that spilled onto his chest and shoulder.

"You've given me something already," he whispered gently. "You've accepted me, in spite of what you know."

"I want you to take my blood, Nick," she said very softly. Her voice didn't betray the tiny thread of fear that lingered within her. Her resolve strengthened as her heart filled with the remembered love her daughter had felt for this man.

"You don't know what you're asking," he snapped harshly.

"You don't know why I'm asking," she corrected. "I don't want to die, Nick. I want you to take enough to enable me to feel your thoughts within my head, and for you to know my heart."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can." She took his head between her hands and smiled at the incredible beauty of his face. "Please trust me, Nicholas. I would never hurt you."

"I might hurt you, Arabella," he told her. "What if I take too much? There's a point where there is no turning back."

"And you won't allow yourself that mistake. I trust you," she stated without doubt. "And I need for you to trust me that much."

He remained unconvinced.

She leaned into him, her lips seeking the smooth hollow of his throat and caressing with sensual intent. He shivered at the provocative touch, and tilted his head back to enjoy her kisses. He heard the

warning in his mind. Her hands began gliding over his chest, then moved lower in a tantalising rediscovery.

"Let me give you my gift, Nicholas?"

The words were a breathy sigh close to his ear. He felt the vampire stirring to awareness and knew he wouldn't be able to refuse her if she continued to incite his passion and with it his hunger.

"You haven't told me what you want," he said, his voice shaken.

"Your trust."

He felt his fangs elongate, knew his eyes had already transformed. His aroused growl of desire drew her head upward from its kissing trek across his chest. Long, pale fingers entwined in heavy waves of dark hair, and Nick lowered his mouth to her neck as her head fell back and she leaned forward to meet him.

The first sweet rush of blood was like a heady wine that intoxicated and made him giddy with happiness. He buried his fangs deeper into yielding flesh and drank as her hands smoothed over his shoulders and ruffled his hair. He felt her desire and her love slowly stealing into his consciousness as he absorbed the essence of her life blood. *I feel your heart, Nick*, she murmured, and he realised the words had been spoken within his mind.

With real effort, he drew back and stared into her face. Dark eyes were dazed and shadowed as she sorted through the memories of his life. He steadied her as the images flooded her mind and left her trembling with the sheer scope of their span.

"We'll be connected for the rest of your life, Arabella," he told her as he lifted a stray tendril of hair from her forehead.

"This intensely?"

He laughed in relief; she didn't sound at all unhappy about the prospect.

"No, in time it will require concentrated effort to feel the bond, but it will always be there."

"Do you regret it?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I don't know, should you?"

"Well?"

She touched his face, her eyes filled with awe and new appreciation.

"Arabella?"

"What?"

"Regrets. Do you have any?"

"None."

"Will you explain why you wanted this?"

"In a few hours, you'll know why. Can you wait?"

He hesitated, then nodded. She snuggled into his arms when he slid lower in the bed, and for the next hours they wordlessly explored the intimacy of their joined thoughts.

\*

"Where are you going?"

Arabella smiled back at him and bent to place a kiss over his heart.

"Close your eyes, Nicholas. See through mine."

He let her slip from the bed, and felt each step she took as she crossed the room and swung open the patio doors. She walked onto the stone balcony, and he felt his heart begin to pound as understanding poured into his mind.

Arabella felt his excitement escalate and a smile slowly transformed her features into radiant joy. She had done the right thing in asking him to drink from her, this *would* be precious to him. The air had changed, the cool night of fall seemed replaced by a breath of summer returning briefly to Bless them. She turned her thoughtful gaze eastward and clutched the stone balustrade when she felt Nick's tense anticipation fill her veins.

The first rays of the emerging sun were thin fingers of gold that curled upward to reach beyond the shelf of the night's horizon. Lying in the bed, eyes tightly shut, Nicholas felt an undeniable surge of fear. He calmed the reaction instantly, told himself repeatedly that it was not really his eyes witnessing this splendour. The momentary fright passed and he concentrated more intently on the flow of the bond he had created with his lovely dancer. Arabella's mental kiss brought a smile to his lips and he drew her into the place that had once been his soul.

The brilliance of the burning sun was almost painful as the first rounded slip of the fiery star crested the skyline. The blackness had receded, driven back by the powerful enchantress that was the sun. Red-gold glory painted the sky a new shade, fading blood against blossoming blue. The rays strengthened, gradually brightened to even more beautiful yellow.

Nick basked in the incredible spectacle that filled his vision. He felt as though he were being reborn, awakened to the hope and possibility of a new life. He wanted desperately to leave the bed and join Arabella, but knew it would be death to him. She raised her arms, he felt the motion, and her head fell back as she bathed in the warmth of the new day. He felt the wash of gentle heat caress skin that was impossibly flushed, and tears formed behind his closed lids.

Time had become suspended in the minutes that held them enslaved by the sunrise. Nick didn't want the beauty he saw to ever fade. Arabella remained where she was, her eyes aching from the strain she'd forced upon them, but she would not move away until he had seen the full emergence of the vivid inferno that had been forbidden to him for eight hundred years. She was exhausted; he could feel it bleeding into their connection, and he knew he couldn't hold her to the light for much longer without risk to her vision and her strength. Reluctantly, he requested that she come back inside to him.

Arabella heard the summons, and cast a final look at the fully visible sun. It blinded her for a few seconds, then she turned away and stumbled back into the cool shadows of her bedroom.

"Nick?"

He caught her and held her to him so tightly she thought he'd crush her. She ignored the minor twinge of pain and wrapped her arms around his neck as she pressed her cheek to his. Tears streamed from her eyes, clear liquid crystal that blended with the scarlet of his.

"It's never seemed that special before," she whispered, her voice awed and faintly textured by fear. "I would give you this vision every day if you wanted it, Nicholas."

"You'd be blind in a week," he teased, but the humour did not reach his voice. He pulled away just enough to allow their eyes to meet. "You can't begin to know what you've given me, Arabella."

"I'd give you anything, Nick," she replied with a watery smile. "I think you know that."

He did.

"Stay with me," he said in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

"It's my bed," she quipped gently.

"Then share it with me," he returned in the same tone.

"When do you have to go back?"

"Tonight." He didn't want to think about leaving her.

"I like that I will always be with you, Nicholas."

He'd find her again, he silently promised himself as they climbed back into bed and curled into each other's arms. When Fate chose her time, he'd be there, and if she asked what was now her right, he'd keep her at his side eternally.

"The darkness is a thing of extraordinary beauty too, Nick," she sighed and reached for the remote control that closed the full length blinds at the patio. He pulled her back to his chest and spooned his long body around hers.

"The darkness is exactly that, Arabella," he said quietly, his gentle voice serious and coloured with melancholy.

"And is the light such a beautiful thing when it holds only emptiness and despair?" she countered softly. "I have walked the days of my life recently in a darkness more profound than any you could show me. Yet it was the darkness that gave me your light. I would not change this past night for a thousand days of sunshine, Nicholas."

"And a thousand years of nights doesn't frighten you?" he wondered.

"Not if they were spent with you," she admitted with a tremor that shook not only her voice but her entire body. "I love you."

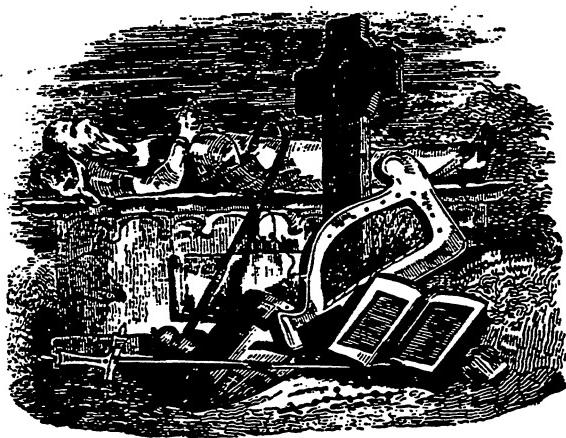
Nick knew she had never uttered those words to any man, and he felt humbled by her devotion. She twisted in his embrace until she could look into his eyes.

"Promise me you will not forget me," she asked.

"I will never forget you, Arabella," he assured her, his tone intense and filled with passion. "I couldn't, even without our bond."

For the first time since her daughter's death, Arabella fell into a sleep that offered peace to her heart. Nick held her close, kissed the top of her head, and allowed the day's warmth to pull him into slumber as well. Still bound, the vampire and the dancer found each other in their shared dream.

- The End -



## **BOUND TO THE DARKNESS**

*by Denysé M. Bridger*

*Creature of the Night,  
Demon lover,  
Soul-mate.*

*So much a part of the darkness that is my spirit.  
You offer immortality.*

*Don't you know?  
It's you I want.  
Not the night,  
Not the strength.*

*The power I desire is your heart.  
To possess the human side of your soul.  
Not because it is as I am,  
But because you need so desperately, too.*

*Silver vision of light,  
Deception in its truest form.  
You laugh at my weakness,  
Even as you revel in it.*

*But, you need me, as I do you.  
Immortality for your heart,  
Will you risk the exchange?*

*I won't leave you,  
I am not as Nicholas was.  
I am yours, LaCroix.  
But, not without a price . . .*

## **THE TEARS OF HEAVEN**

*by Denysé M. Bridger*

*I have wept the tears of heaven for you  
Unending sorrow born of unearthly joy  
You have taught me life and death  
The beauties of horror, the ugliness of a smile  
Immortal Master  
You who holds the very key to my existence  
Eternal friend and keeper of my soul  
How could I betray you?  
Search your heart, your wisdom, your mind  
Feel what you have made me into  
Your willing confidant and consort  
Keeper of your ageless soul  
I have wept the tears of heaven for you  
And I have tasted the bitter wine of loss  
You have punished me as no other could  
Denied me the shelter of your caring  
Immortal Master  
What do I have left without you?  
Eternal emptiness a thousand times over  
Why have you betrayed me?*

## *Silent All These Years*

*by*

*Valerie Meachum*

Sometimes I hear my voice  
And it's been here  
Silent all these years  
-Tori Amos

*[Author's Note: This story was completed in December of 1992, based on the "Forever Knight" characters as we saw them up to that point. Any similarities that may exist between it and aired events in the series after that date are purely coincidental; any differences are offered in the spirit of the alternate universe.]*

Toronto, 1992

"Well, I'd better get to the airport," Nick said. "Thanks again for the news."

"Of course," Janette answered with a slight smile. "I wondered why you seemed so distracted; Natalie is coming home from her vacation." When he nodded, a little sheepishly, she went on, "You worry too much. And I think you underestimate her, Nicolas. She will never forget, but she will heal."

"I don't know. She trusted, and almost paid for it with her life. I've been afraid of that all along — but I thought the danger came from me. Instead it came from a mortal killer who offered her what I can't..." Nick gave her a quizzical look. "Why are you interested?"

"Perhaps because you are. Perhaps because I understand." With a shrug, she continued, "Does it matter? Take my word for it, she will be fine."

"Yeah." He didn't sound convinced. "But I think she needs to stay away from men she meets on her birthday."

"Even you?"

"Especially me. But I guess it's a little late to decide that now."

"I'm afraid you're stuck with her," Janette agreed. "It's quite a talent with you."

Studying her a moment, Nick finally replied, "I guess so. And Nat has a talent for hiding hurt — but you're the genius at that."

"Ah, but do you worry about me like this?"

"Always have," he answered. "Take care, Janette."

"Always have, *chéri*." She nodded toward the door. "Go fetch Natalie."

She took a long drag on her cigarette as he vanished through the door, reflecting briefly that she really had landed herself in a most peculiar position, one she would occupy forever. Anyone else, she supposed, would be jealous of the coroner's place in Nick's life, but Janette saw no point. Natalie was

everything she was not: honest, generous, oddly innocent — and mortal. Someday Nick's time with her would run out; it nearly had a week ago, when she had fallen prey to the charming madman who had already strangled four women, so Janette could hardly begrudge it.

But Janette was also all that Natalie was not, and for that reason had no fear that she would evertruly be replaced. She could always wait, and frequently had. And she always got her chance to remind him that he was quite stuck with her, and that it wasn't such a bad thing. After all, he needed never fear harming her, and she would always be around. Always and forever...

## Los Angeles, 1962

"Want to go get a cup of coffee or something?" asked the young woman as she locked the gallery door.

"Not tonight, thank you, Marcia."

"Or any other night," she returned, a smile taking the sting from her words. "Honestly, Nick, there are places in this city other than here and wherever you live and the route in between. You might want to explore them sometime."

"Maybe sometime," he agreed noncommittally. "Good night, Marcia."

"G'night."

Nick watched to be certain the girl reached her car safely, then turned and headed for his own new toy.

"*Bonsoir, Nicolas.*" Janette knew perfectly well what sort of picture she must make, curled into the passenger seat of the new Cadillac convertible. She had just bought a crumpled-looking off-the-shoulder dress of the sort popularized by that ubiquitous photograph of Marilyn Monroe, but in her trademark black; and she found that her features were well suited by current fashion in the short, full hairstyle and the feline sweep of eye makeup. Casting Nick one of her most dazzling smiles, she shifted slightly to better show off her silk-stockinged legs. Short skirts were one twentieth-century development she had found very useful indeed.

Predictably, none of this had any visible impact on its target; but that was part of the game. Instead he asked irritably, "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" Janette purred.

"And I suppose he's right behind you," Nick grumped, settling in the driver's seat and slamming the door. "Might as well get it over with. Where is he?"

"Dublin," she answered airily. "It's just you and me, *cher*."

He stared at her in surprise. "Are you serious? Janette, please tell me you're serious!" A hopeful, childlike smile lit his face, and he grasped her hand. "Have you really left LaCroix, finally taken charge of your life?"

Laying her other hand over his, she looked away, her smile slipping slightly. "He had...business to attend to. I took the opportunity to look you up."

"Oh." He squeezed her hand before releasing it, his smile fading, and slid the car into the midnight traffic.

"So who's your pretty friend?" she asked, her voice holding more than a passing interest.

"Just someone I work with at the gallery."

"I think she hopes otherwise."

"Not because I've encouraged her," Nick returned wearily. "Better to disappoint Marcia than to hurt her, wouldn't you say?"

Janette shrugged. "I suppose. Poor, lonely Nicolas. Whatever would you do without me?"

"That is *not* a pleasant question," he admitted.

"Hmm. But I like the answer." She edged closer to him, glancing around the Caddy's interior. "You know, the young people have found a perfectly delightful use for back seats."

Chuckles in spite of himself at her typical lack of subtlety, Nick replied, "Well, we're not exactly young, are we?"

"You're only as old as you feel, Nicolas."

"I feel pretty damned old."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Resting her head on his shoulder, Janette added, "We'll just have to try and solve that little problem."

He glanced at her before turning her attention back to his driving, trying hard to banish the smile invading his face. "Kids in back seats tend to have police peer in at them with flashlights," he pointed out.

"Do they? That could be amusing."

"It could also be dangerous."

"Oh, I suppose you're right," she sniffed, letting the dress slip further down one shoulder. "So what do you propose instead?" she added half an octave lower, punctuating the question with a little nibble at his earlobe.

At this point Nick lost the war with the smile. "Seems to me you have the monopoly on propositions."

"Playing hard to get, Nicolas?" she teased. "Beverly Wilshire Hotel."

Janette thought she restrained herself quite well until they reached her suite, only raising an amused eyebrow or two in the lobby by the way she clung to his arm. It was not vanity, merely fact, to note that a few of the gentlemen they passed looked as if they would like to be in Nicolas' place.

The instant the door was shut behind them, though, with the "Do Not Disturb" sign carefully placed on the outside knob, she draped herself around him, sliding her fingers through his hair. "Have you missed me?"

And now the game was over; he was hers and he knew it. "Oh, yes."

\*

She wasn't sure what time it was or why she was suddenly awake. But in the last century her opportunities to be with Nicolas had grown increasingly rare, so she leant on her elbow to drink in the sleeping face beside her. For all she knew with the heavy drapes drawn, it was high noon, but there was a better purpose for this moment than sleeping.

Even after seven and a half centuries, her handsome knight remained half a little boy, and that side of him was never more evident than when he slept. Then, too, she could study him at her leisure, without having to catch him off his guard between the bouts of bitterness and guilt that hardened his chameleon features. LaCroix was wrong after all, though it had been centuries since she was fool enough to say so: Nicolas would never be completely lost to the darkness. He shone as brightly now as that first night she had seen him and been drawn irresistibly to that brightness.

With a fingertip she traced his cheekbone up to ruffle his short-cropped hair. His eyes flew open and found Janette's face very near his own, prompting a crooked little smile.

"*Bonjour, cheri,*" she whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Salright. What time is it?"

"I don't know. Still day, though."

Looking about the hotel suite, a touch disoriented, Nick commented, "We made a mess."

"Yes, I suppose we did. The wonderful thing about hotels: I simply pay my bill and leave it behind." Snuggling closer, she murmured, "Want to make it worse?"

"Hmm." Kissing the top of her raven head, he turned her in his arms and tucked his face beside hers over her shoulder. "Maybe later. Don't you believe in sleep, Janette?"

"If we must." She burrowed further under the covers, fitting her body against his with the ease of very long familiarity, and in no time at all both were fast asleep.

Paris, 1228

"Have you made a choice?" As always, LaCroix dispensed with the sort of formalities that customarily opened a conversation, such as making his presence known to the person he was addressing

before suddenly speaking in her ear.

"I don't know," Janette replied. "Right now I'm rather enjoying watching them."

LaCroix nodded. "And some are watching you, a few in rather less than courtly fashion."

She smiled perfunctorily in response to the amusement in his voice; time and again he had told her that drawing out the shadows in men's souls was a pleasure second only to the kill itself, but she had yet to learn to take the great delight in it that LaCroix did. No matter — she could pretend well enough. "So we will not starve tonight."

"Oh, I have far more interesting plans than that," LaCroix informed her. "Which of them would you like for your very own — forever?"

"What?" She had been about to go back to the rowdy feast hall in search of her own supper, but now she closed the door again and turned back to LaCroix in disbelief. "You mean bring over one of them? LaCroix, you cannot be serious! What lure could our life have for men who marched halfway across the world to fight for their God?"

"And who now celebrate that conquest by eating and drinking themselves into oblivion," LaCroix scoffed. "So much for the legendary shining goodness of the Crusader."

"One night's well-earned pleasure can hardly compare with choosing the darkness for eternity."

Taking slow, deliberate steps, LaCroix approached her with an unmistakeable hint of menace. "But that's where you come in, Janette. Do you doubt your power to make that one night into that eternity?"

"Of course not, but..."

"But what?" By now he stood right in front of her, forcing her to look up in order to face him, and she resisted the instinct to back away from the look in his ice-blue eyes. "You take issue with my plans, Janette?" he whispered ominously.

"But knights of the Cross?" she insisted. "What would they want with me?"

"A man is a man, Janette, no matter what armor he wears. You know that as well as I do." Her gaze dropped at this, and he took hold of her face, forcing her to look at him. "You have no doubt that you *can* do this; what you are saying is that you *won't*." His grip on her chin tightened to emphasize the last word. "I saw how you looked at the blond one, the *hero*." On his lips, the word meant something else entirely. "And I saw how he looked at you." Releasing her face, he circled slowly around her. "Have you ever imagined how Adam eyed the forbidden fruit, Janette? That is how Nicholas was watching you. Yes, that is his name," he informed her when she looked up in surprise. "And you did want to know that, didn't you?"

"He holds no interest for me," she lied.

"I think he holds too much," LaCroix corrected, reversing the direction of his stalking circle. "I think you seek to protect him. I think you wish to see his...knightly purity preserved."

She could not meet his gaze, but somehow she found her voice. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, you do. But don't you know why his light fascinates you so? Can you even begin to imagine the triumph of blotting it out forever? I gave you that power, Janette, and you will use it as it was meant. You will bring Nicholas to me."

"No!" The sharp whisper exploded from her before she could prevent it, and she knew it was a terrible mistake.

"No?" he repeated very quietly. An instant later, Janette was slammed violently into the wall, her head striking the stone with a resounding *crack*. She slid to the floor, stars dancing behind her eyes, instinctively curling into a ball to protect her head from further injury — though of course the present fracture was already mending. "Who is the master, Janette?" asked LaCroix's voice, somewhere far above her. When she could not gather her wits to reply immediately, he seized her by the hair and yanked her to her feet. "Who is the master?"

Still dazed, she fought to focus on his face. "You are," she managed, her own voice distorted by the ringing in her head.

"You do remember." He nodded. "I am your master, and soon I will be master to Nicholas as well." Brushing his fingertips along her cheek, he added with a smile, "And then I can give him to you.

Isn't that what you really want?"

Reluctantly she nodded. "But what will be left of him?"

Uttering a disgusted snarl, he grasped her by the throat and flung her to the floor. "Collect yourself and go claim your knight. I will be waiting."

Hauling herself into a sitting position, Janette nodded. "Yes, of course. Just a moment."

"You are pathetic," LaCroix told her, as if commenting on the weather. He strode to the door, turning to Janette once more before slamming it behind him. "I should have left you where I found you."

#### Lutetia Parisiorum, A.D. 84

"So how did you fare last night, Gwennet?"

The dark-haired girl's heart skipped a beat at the unexpected voice; she had thought she would be the first back to the women's quarters. "Luciana! Ye gods, you frightened the life out of me! Did you steal Mercury's sandals?"

The other girl laughed shortly. "If I had, maybe I wouldn't have been stuck with a pickled old man who couldn't get it up and blamed it on me. He flew into a very comical rage and chased me out before midnight."

"Oh, Luciana, I'm sorry." Gwennet sank down on the bench beside her friend. "Perhaps you'll have better luck when the *domina*'s brothers arrive tomorrow, hm?"

Luciana almost smiled. "Perhaps. But you won't come away empty-handed; you never do." She gestured to Gwennet's tightly-clenched hand. "So what have you got? I noticed you managed to land in the richest lap again."

Gwennet could not contain her excitement, a broad grin lighting her face as she opened her hand to reveal her token of the patrician guest's appreciation. "I'm not sure what its value must be," she said, holding up the flawless egg of amber that could not quite be enclosed in her small hand. "Can you imagine, Luciana, having so much wealth that this is a bauble to give a slave?"

"The luckiest slave in Gaul, most of the time," Luciana clarified. "But the bones fall as they will, and it isn't as if you don't deserve the attention."

"No more than you." Gwennet protested. "Really, you're just as pretty as any of the rest of us. Prettier than most. And you don't exactly cling to the walls. I'll never understand why you don't get better than you do."

Luciana shrugged. "If they venture all the way to Gaul, why should they want a girl born and reared in Rome when they can have the exotic barbarian princess and fancy it a great conquest?" Before Gwennet could reply, she rose from the bench, adding, "But that's Fortuna's business; we mere mortals simply take what we are given, then go to find a bit of rest."

"Sleep well, Luciana." Gwennet watched the Roman girl make her weary way toward the sleeping quarters, her high spirits dimmed slightly by her friend's misfortune. It really was not fair; why were her delicate Gallic features and peculiar name of so much more value than Luciana's perfectly balanced beauty, like the sculptor's ideal Galatea become flesh?

But asking such questions was a waste of time, for no one would answer them. Things were as they were, and only as a foolish child had she believed she would ever have the power to change them.

She could not blame her mother for choosing to believe until the day she died the pretty fiction woven by her own mother, Gwennet's grandmother, whose father Vercingetorix had led the ill-fated rebellion against the occupying Romans. Edanna had accepted only pretty things, lacking the strength to face anything else, and her favorite pretty thing was her daughter. In retrospect Gwennet had to wonder if her mother had ever realized than she was anything more than a magical doll; a perfect miniature of herself but for the spun-shadow hair inherited from some Roman or other, a dramatic contrast to Edanna's coppery gold. Certainly she had never dreamed that the little girl's mind greedily absorbed everything she saw and heard, building each detail into her growing perception of her world and the way it worked. By her seventh year she had been quite aware that the *dominus* spoiled her with sweets and smiles because

her mother was a favored possession. He had a wife.

When Gwennet, with the naive frankness of childhood, had made note of that fact, Edanna had turned very pale and struck her for the first and only time in her life. Seconds later she had burst into tears, telling the child over and over that she hadn't meant it. Later, calmer, she had explained that Gwennet must never think of herself as a slave, no matter what she might be told. She was a princess, her blood more royal than any of these Roman "patricians" who thought them beaten. And someday she would choose a chieftain to do what Vercingetorix could not, to take back their land and their gods and their identity and drive the Romans out forever.

For a while Gwennet let herself be caught up in the illusion, reminding herself whenever the *domina* gave her a disdainful look or another child called her "mongrel" that she knew something they did not, that she was not what they thought she was. Then, in her thirteenth summer, an honored guest had remarked on the unusual beauty of the girl who had brought the wine; and from that terrifying night on she knew exactly what she was.

And by knowing that she knew just what she could and could not do. She had learned very quickly how to make the best of what she could do, learned to tell at a glance which of her master's guests were interested in her and might reward her well-honed charm and attentiveness. Most importantly, with enough gold she could buy her freedom; and after ten years of saving her various trinkets in a sack hidden beneath a loose tile in the corner of this anteroom, she had very nearly enough.

Checking to be certain she was not observed, she pried up the tile and pulled out the sack — to find it empty. It was several moments before the truth of this penetrated; Gwennet stared in disbelief at the worthless rag that had held her little fortune, looking from it to the amber in her hand and back again.

She had been so certain no one knew of her hoard's existence, let alone its location; certain they assumed she squandered whatever she might earn as slaves generally did. Now that overconfidence had cost her everything, and there was nothing at all she could do about it. Had she known or even suspected the thief's identity, she could have taken the matter to the housekeeper, or to the *domina* if she was in a generous mood, and have justice. But she had no idea; it was all simply gone, even her mother's silver torque, the tangible symbol of her "royalty". Gwennet cursed herself for her sentimental refusal to sell the thing, meaningless as she knew it to be in a world shaped by Roman hands. She could have been free by now; and though she would always be a barbarian and therefore inferior in that world, her lineage and looks might have won her a marriage into the puppet Gallic nobility.

Instead she had nothing all over again. Numbly she slipped her bit of amber into the sack, carrying it to the sleeping quarters since her hiding place was no longer a secret. Tucking it under the straw tick of her bed, she stared at the ceiling and willed herself not to weep for the loss. Finally, as the sun climbed above the horizon and the others began to straggle in, she fell asleep and stored the tears away unshed.

\*

Gwennet was hard-pressed to exercise her fabled charm that evening; after ten years of fawning and flirting and flattering a parade of dirty old men, her goal had been yanked further away than ever. But it was still her goal, and this was still the only way she could achieve it. With that reminder to herself, she squared her shoulders and filed in with the other girls chosen to entertain the *domina*'s three brothers and their companions.

It was some time into the evening when she noticed Luciana's self-satisfied smile — and the silver torque around the Roman girl's neck. Lead weights settled in the pit of Gwennet's stomach, and she turned to her current patron with a brilliant smile. "I will be back before you can blink, patrician," she promised, touching the tip of her finger to his nose. "I must make certain you have the very best of the grapes."

Without preamble she seized Luciana by the arm and pulled her into an alcove. "Where did you get that?" she demanded in a sharp whisper.

Luciana's expression only grew more smug. "The *dominus* is generous with those who serve him well."

"And where did he get it? That's mine, Luciana, and well you know it!"

"Not any more. Perhaps it will make me a princess now, eh, Gwennet the favored one?"

The words struck her like a slap to the face, momentarily stunning her out of her anger. "I thought you were my friend!"

"That's your misfortune," Luciana shot back. "Perhaps if you hadn't spent so much time playing princess, you'd have learned that slaves can't afford friends."

"You stole it, didn't you?" Gwennet couldn't keep her voice from rising. "Luciana, how could you?"

"I did nothing."

"You did! That was everything I had, all I have earned in ten years!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, you little thief!"

"Prove it."

"What is the commotion here?" Gwennet nearly jumped out of her skin at the *dominus'* voice. Gaius Marcellus Draxo was an imposing man with very little patience for squabbles among his slaves, particularly when guests were present.

"Your pardon, *dominus*," Gwennet said, quickly swallowing her anger. "That torque is mine. It was given to me by my mother before she died, and yesterday it and all my savings were stolen."

"Really?" He took a step forward, forcing her back into the corner. "That's very strange, Gwennet, since I made a gift of that piece to Luciana this morning. It is part of a captured treasure."

"But..."

"Will you call me thief next, girl?"

"Of course not, *dominus*, but there must be some mistake."

Gaius Marcellus glared down at her. "There is no mistake. Take care; there are penalties for false accusations."

"It is not false!" Gwennet insisted, her hopes of justice rapidly slipping away. "The torque is mine, and only she could have known where it was hidden!"

"Then you call me a liar, and this innocent girl a thief?"

Too late she saw the trap she had fallen into. "No! I mean, you are not—"

"I have had enough of this," the *dominus* interrupted. "You will come with me, Gwennet, now. Luciana, return to the feast and inform the guests that I will return when I have attended to a small matter."

"Yes, *dominus*." Luciana's triumphant smile made Gwennet wish desperately to rip her face off, but she held her peace and meekly followed Gaius Marcellus to his private chambers.

"Leave us," he commanded the valet curtly. The man obeyed instantly, sparing Gwennet a sympathetic glance that did nothing for her nerves.

"I don't believe we understand each other, *dominus*," the *dominus* told her ominously. "You are my property, and you would be wise to remember that. There will be no chosen chieftain, no barbarian uprising, no matter what nonsense the old ones in the kitchen may spin to fill your pretty head."

"I don't care what the old ones believe of me," Gwennet replied truthfully. "I wish only to save my earnings and buy my freedom, as is the right of any slave. And those earnings have been stolen from me."

"But you are not *any* slave, Gwennet," he pointed out, taking hold of her chin. "Were you to go free, there would be no controlling the Gallic rabble in this household or any neighboring one. They would be certain you were claiming your 'birthright'."

Her eyes widened at the implications of his words. "You had Luciana steal my things! You would deny me the rights of every slave in the Empire, in defiance of the law!"

"We are a long way from Rome, little raven," he told her, with a savage cuff that sent her sprawling across the bed. "And in this house, I *am* the law."

Head pounding, she could only keep still and endure as he climbed atop her and brutally reminded her of her function in his household.

When it was over, Gaius Marcellus straightened his clothing and jerked her from the bed. "Get out," he ordered. "You are confined to the women's quarters until I say otherwise. And remember, Gwennet: this was a warning."

A warning? She nearly laughed at that. So this was what her "rights" under the law were worth.

The floor would not keep still as she made her way through the house, and at some point she made a wrong turn and found herself at the side entrance. She was about to turn and head toward the correct destination, but she hesitated. Her boundaries had changed; the world did not work as she had believed. They would not allow her to buy her freedom, and her feet had led her here to tell her she must take it.

Bruised and bleeding, with only her flimsy linen dress tunic to protect her from the chill spring rain that was beginning to fall, Gwennet stepped out into the night and never looked back.

\*

How long had she walked? She wasn't certain, though she suspected she had not travelled nearly so far as it seemed. It was raining harder now, icy needles piercing her inadequate clothing. Her left eye had swollen shut from one of the blows her master had struck her when she failed to hold back her screams during the rape, and her good eye could make out nothing through the rain and darkness.

Quite suddenly there was a human figure in her path, where she was certain there had been no one a moment before, and before the information could reach her feet she bumped into him.

"Your pardon, patrician," she spoke up quickly, noting the man's rich red mantle as he turned on her the coldest, palest blue eyes she had ever seen. "I did not see you."

"I'm not surprised," he answered, lifting her chin to study her battered face. His voice was not unfriendly, but it held a quality that chilled her more deeply than the rain. "You've chosen a poor time to run away from your master."

"I'm not running away, patrician," she answered, too quickly. "I have to—"

"Don't lie to me," he interrupted softly. "You are in no condition to convince anyone. What is your name?"

"Gwennet, patrician," she replied. "Please, I must—"

"You must get indoors before this treacherous weather finishes you off. Though it looks as if your master very nearly did that already."

Gwennet shook her head, trying to walk past him. "I am all right, patrician, I assure you. Now I really must..." The ground took a sudden, disagreeable lurch, and the stranger caught her before she fell.

"No more arguments," he told her, wrapping his warm mantle around her and supporting her shoulders. "You are coming with me."

Quite beyond argument, Gwennet doubled over at a stab of unbearable pain in her abdomen. The stranger scooped her up as if she weighed no more than her clothing, the last thing she was aware of before another spasm hit and she retreated into oblivion.

\*

She had no idea how much later she wandered into a hazy sort of consciousness, listening to a pair of voices saying such strange things that she must be dreaming.

"...a pretty enough trinket under the bruises, but hardly worth the price Draxo demanded."

"That's my business, Father." The second voice belonged to her mysterious benefactor. "The gold I paid for her was mine."

"Watch your step, Crassus," the unfamiliar voice warned, in a tone too like the one her *dominus* had used when she had last seen him. "Beware that little word, 'mine'. It could lead you to ruin."

"The money was mine, and so is the girl."

"As you wish — for now. But what do you mean to do with her? Why go to the trouble of paying the fool at all?"

"I told you, that's my business. If I choose to pay the mortal his ridiculous price, and then have

to bend his mind to make him keep the bargain — well, no one can argue that the girl belongs to me. Not even you."

"We are not like them. We *take* what we want. Do you know what you want?"

"Perfectly, Father."

"What game are you playing with this slave girl? Why go to this bother? If it is her blood you want, there is little point in letting her heal."

"Perhaps I don't want her blood."

"Then what do you want?"

Gwennet was rather interested in the answer to that herself, but the disturbing conversation faded away and she slid again into unconsciousness.

When she woke again, the bizarre debate receded to the realm of remembered dreams, where it certainly must belong.

"Easy now, pretty," crooned an old woman's voice as she moved to sit up, and a gnarled hand pushed her back onto the cushions of the bed.

Gwennet blinked at the face beside her, a face from her childhood. She had not seen the midwife-healer since the wasting sickness had taken her mother, but she would know that wizened face anywhere. "Morag?"

"Your memory is in fine health, I see." The crone's toothless smile was that of an indulgent grandmother. "I'm glad. For a time I feared we would lose you as well as the baby."

"Baby?"

The midwife's face fell. "You were with child, little raven. Didn't you know?"

So that was what the stabbing pains had been. "No, I didn't really pay attention. It doesn't matter; how could I even know whose child it was?" Against the old woman's protests, she sat up, shaking her head. "And I am no one's 'little' anything, Morag. Not any more."

"Very well, Lady." Morag nodded in deference.

"Not that, either," Gwennet corrected. "I am a slave like any other; the Romans have ruled throughout my life and my mother's. Can we please stop pretending that I will put things back as they were?" She sighed. "Perhaps they aren't meant to be, have you thought of that?"

"You mustn't think that, Lady Gwennet," the wise-woman chided her. "You must not lose courage. When the time comes—"

"What good does it do me to believe that?" Gwennet demanded impatiently. "Morag, please. You would help me far more if you would tell me where I am and what has happened."

"You are a guest in the house of Darius Aquila," said a man's voice. Gwennet turned round, swinging her feet to the floor, to face the strange, pale man she had met in the rain. "I am his son, Crassus. I trust you are feeling better since our last conversation?"

She nodded, wary at his too-perfect friendliness. "Yes, patrician. Thank you."

"Good." He turned his attention briefly to Morag, giving the midwife a curt nod. "You've done well, old woman."

Morag needed no further dismissal. "Take care, little Morrigan," she said to Gwennet as she left.

Her host turned back to her with a questioning look. "You said your name was Gwennet."

"It is," she replied. "She was referring to a childhood nickname. The Morrigan is an aspect of the Goddess of my mother's people, the raven who carries shades to the next world. I was called 'little raven' for my black hair, and because I was so serious as a child."

"I see." He paused a second. "You say your mother's people, not yours."

Gwennet shrugged. "It seems to me you get further by understanding the world as it is than by choosing to believe you can change it." Studying Crassus intently, she added, "Which brings me to the question of why I am here. What do you gain by showing me kindness?"

"What do I gain?" he repeated curiously, favoring her with a reassuring smile. "Why must that be the reason? I brought you here because I wished to, and paid Gaius Marcellus to let you go."

This was a surprise. "You did? Then I didn't dream that I heard that?"

Crassus' smile vanished. "When? What did you hear?"

"I heard you tell your father that you had paid gold for me," she replied. "I wasn't quite awake, I don't think. Some of it was so strange, it must have been part dream."

"What was strange?"

Gwennet shook her head. "You'll think me mad, and send me back where I came from."

Leaning close to her face, he held her eyes and repeated, "What was strange, Gwennet?"

This time she answered promptly, uncertain why she had been reluctant to do so. "I heard talk of blood, and of bending minds. It made little sense, but it was frightening."

"You have nothing to fear," Crassus told her quietly, and she believed him without question. "You were not awake, Gwennet. You will forget that conversation. You heard nothing."

"Nothing," she agreed tonelessly; then blinked, a bit disoriented, as he stood up straight and released her gaze.

"You must be hungry. I will be back with food for you; the wise-woman tells me you should not move around too much yet."

"You should not be serving me, patrician," Gwennet objected.

Crassus shook his head. "I told you, you are a guest in this house. My father and I do not keep slaves."

"Oh." She watched him leave, his parting smile remaining in her mind as she wrestled with the notion of being a free woman, a guest in a house without slaves.

Most anyone she knew would be overjoyed at that prospect, but Gwennet found herself unable to enjoy it. There were too many pieces missing; she could not be comfortable until she knew her boundaries. What did Crassus expect of her? There had to be something.

It would be easy to assume that he wanted the same thing as every other man she had met since her sudden departure from childhood; but she had too recently been reminded that she could not afford to make assumptions. Still, what else had she to offer?

Lacking answers for all her questions, she instead took her first real look around the room where she had been placed. The appointments were as rich as anything to be found in her former master's villa. She pulled back a heavy drapery on one wall to find a dark window; it was night, then, but how many nights after her mad flight? No more than a day or two, she decided; Crassus was right that she was hungry, but not painfully so.

Near the bed she found an ivory comb and a highly-polished bronze mirror. The sharp memory of the blows Gaius Marcellus had struck to her face prepared her for the state of her reflection. A huge dark bruise encircled her left eye; another marred her right cheekbone. She had to acknowledge the deep blue eyes looking back at her as her own, her mother's eyes; but she did not care to claim the rest.

But the marks would fade. What bothered her as she pulled the comb through her tangled dark hair was that her beauty would return, but never the child she had not even known she carried.

She had told Morag it didn't matter, and now she repeated the statement to herself, wondering if the midwife had believed it any more than Gwennet herself. Probably not.

Why should it matter, though? She had always felt a mixture of pity and contempt for the slave women who were burdened with little ones, yet still expected to maintain the beauty and skill that earned their keep — her own mother included. Why did she feel so sharp a pang of loss that she had been spared such a nuisance? Certainly she had never wished to be a mother.

Unexpectedly a stranger's voice intruded on her reverie, and she whirled to find a brown-haired man standing just behind her. "What is so special about you, girl?" he demanded without preamble.

"I beg your pardon." Gwennet backed up several steps, uncertain what to make of the rude question. "You must be the *dominus*, Crassus' father. I thank you for your hospitality; I wish to know how I can repay—"

"What makes you different?" he interrupted harshly, ignoring Gwennet's polite talk.

"I'm sorry, *dominus*, I don't understand."

Darius grasped her wrists, pulling her roughly toward him. "What does my son want with you?"

Fighting to keep calm, Gwennet answered, "I don't know, *dominus*. He hasn't told me." She attempted to pull her hands free, but his grip only tightened. "Please, *dominus*, you're hurting me."

"Of course you don't know," he mused, an unpleasant smile crossing his face. "He would hardly have told you what place you have in whatever game he's playing, would he?"

"Dominus..." Whatever Gwennet had been about to say vanished into a maelstrom of sheer panic, for suddenly Darius Aquila was not human. His eyes, brown a second before, had turned a green-tinged yellow, and as he opened his mouth to speak she saw that his eyeteeth were the long, sharp fangs of a predatory animal.

"He must learn to play his games by my rules," the man-thing concluded, wrenching Gwennet's head back by the hair to expose her throat.

"No!"

In one dizzying instant, she was jerked from Darius' grasp and found herself halfway across the room. Crassus, who had not been there a moment before, held her by the shoulders and hissed at his father, "She does not belong to you!"

"Everything in this house belongs to me," Darius retorted. "What I want, I take. That is the master's privilege."

"Not this time." Crassus' voice was deadly calm, a world away from the shouting of seconds before. "The time has come to be my own master, Father. This is long overdue."

Darius' smile returned, made a mockery by those wicked teeth. "And every master must have servants of his own, mustn't he?" he guessed, nodding toward Gwennet, who shrank closer to her protector and held her tongue. She could not pretend to understand what was happening here, but she could observe that for his own reasons Crassus shared her interest in keeping her neck away from Darius' teeth. The rest could wait.

"And what if I forbid this?" Darius continued, taking a few deliberate steps toward them. Crassus' grasp on her shoulders tightened, but he stood his ground.

"If everything in this house belongs to you, so be it," he told his father calmly. "We will not remain in this house."

Darius laughed, the nastiest sound Gwennet could remember ever hearing, and slowly advanced on them again. "And where will you go, Crassus? Dawn is breaking."

The narrowing distance between them finally prompted Crassus to back toward the window, drawing Gwennet with him. "I know how long I can dare the sun, Father. Will you dare to follow?" With that he grabbed Gwennet's hand and pulled her after him, through the window and out into the very beginnings of the dawn.

"But what if he follows us?" She glanced fearfully over her shoulder as they ran into a stretch of forest.

"He won't," he answered flatly, pulling her faster. "Watch where we're going!"

"But how can you be certain—" Her voice and her feet stopped dead as she realized that smoke was rising from Crassus as if his clothing were on fire — but it was not. "What—?"

"Come on, girl!" he snapped, a note of panic creeping into his voice. His grip on her hand became painful, but she dared not speak or impede their progress again.

They ran on, clinging to the shadows of the trees, until they arrived at a fairly large clearing. Crassus paused at the edge of the trees, still burning, and peered at the small stone house at the center of the clearing as if gauging the distance.

"What is happening to you?" Gwennet whispered anxiously. "What do we do?"

"Later," he managed, his voice strained, then cried out in obvious pain as they plunged into the bright daylight. He stumbled several times as they ran toward the cottage, and Gwennet did her best to aid him, guiding him toward what she presumed was their destination as he protected his face with his arms. "Cellar," Crassus gasped as they reached the shade of the granite walls. "Don't stand there gawping, girl! It's just around the corner there. Wooden door." Shoving her roughly away from the wall, he hissed, "Hurry! I can't withstand much more!"

Orders were something she understood, and she leapt to obey. A few moments later they were safely hidden in the cool darkness of a dirt root cellar.

"Watch your step," Crassus admonished her as she tripped on something, his voice strong again.

"What do you mean, watch my step? I can't see a thing!"

She heard laughter in the dark. "Of course you can't. What a fool I am. Wait here." A number of little noises came out of the dark, mysterious until he struck flint to a small oil lamp.

Gwennet looked around enough to ascertain that they were in a perfectly ordinary root cellar, then at last gave voice to her questions. "What does all this madness mean?" she demanded. "Why did the sun make you burn like that? *What is your father?*"

"I will explain these things," he promised, "but not now. Explanations must wait; you are too tired now."

"But I'm not—"

"Oh, but you are," he insisted, holding eye contact as he had earlier. Gwennet tried to pull her gaze away, but found herself unable even to blink. "Much too tired." And she was, her mind filling with fog, penetrated only by Crassus' soft voice. "You are not yet well, Gwennet. You must rest now. You will sleep until I wake you."

\*

When he did, she emerged from the secure darkness of sleep into another unfamiliar room, this time a poor one with a thatched roof that must be the interior of the forest cottage. "Feeling better, Gwennet?"

She leapt from the straw pallet, pressing her back against the wall. "What did you do to me? Are you a sorcerer?"

"Not exactly." He smiled. "It's a simple power. I could give it to you — that and so much more. Now sit down and we will talk."

She obeyed, watching him warily while trying to avoid meeting the icicle eyes. "Where are we?" she asked more calmly.

"The home of the wise-woman, Morag. She was quite concerned about her princess. I arranged for her to shelter us."

"You said you would explain, about your father and the sun and all the rest."

Before he could reply, Morag entered the little house, carrying a basket filled with freshly-picked herbs and mushrooms. "You're awake, Lady," she observed brightly. "You were sleeping so soundly, I thought it best to let you rest." Setting her basket on the floor, the old woman bent over to examine Gwennet's battered face. "You're healing well, little raven. Now you must eat something."

Gwennet accepted the wooden bowl of soup gratefully. "Thank you, I *am* hungry." She hadn't really noticed until food was mentioned, but now she realized her stomach was tight and achey, and she was a bit lightheaded. "I've had nothing to eat in..."

"Nearly three days," Crassus supplied. "You've been very ill, after all."

"Yes, she has, poor pretty," Morag agreed, picking up her basket again. "But soon you'll be well again, Lady Gwennet, and the Roman bastard's marks on you will fade away."

"Thank you," Gwennet repeated, gingerly touching the bruise on her cheek.

"I must go to the village now; three more little ones have taken the fever. You rest up, little raven." With that, she was gone again.

Gwennet set the empty soup bowl on the floor, keeping her eyes averted from Crassus sitting beside her.

"An illness among the children," he mused. "You need never be ill again, Gwennet. Never fear the sort of injuries you have suffered at your former master's hands."

"Don't be silly," she chided him. "A freedwoman is just as vulnerable to such things as a slave, or anyone else."

"You are free, Gwennet, but that is not what I meant."

Something in his voice made her shiver, and she rose from the pallet and walked several steps away to stand with her back to him, rubbing her arms as if with a chill. "Then what did you mean?"

"I can give you power, Gwennet, beyond your dreams." He spoke just beside her, though she had not heard the slightest rustle of his approach.

"Your father is a monster," she reminded him nervously, still not looking at him. "What does that make you? What sort of nightmare is this?"

"No nightmare," he assured her, his voice approaching the lulling tone he had used when she had fallen under that strange spell. Still she feared to look at his face; he leaned very close to her ear as he went on, "I can make you what I am, Gwennet, make it so you need never fear Gaius Marcellus and fools like him. If you wish, you can make them fear you."

At this, she looked sharply at him, forgetting for a second her determination not to meet his eyes again. A second was enough; she found her gaze locked to his as she asked uneasily, "Why would I want them to fear me?"

"You'd be surprised," he answered, "what a thrill it can be. Think of what I offer you, Gwennet!"

"You haven't told me," she pointed out, determined to keep her thoughts clear as the fog crept in around the edges of her mind. "Just what do you 'offer' me?"

"All your life you have served men," he nearly whispered, brushing his fingertips over her bruised cheek. "Now you can make men serve you. You will be the princess you were born to be." He slid a hand up her neck to hold the back of her head, and involuntarily she took a step toward him. "You will live forever, like the raven of your mother's Goddess. You will see the Romans fall and crumble into dust." He pulled her another step closer, still holding her gaze though she had to tilt her head far back. "You need only do exactly as I say."

"And if I refuse?" Her voice seemed to come from a source other than herself, and the mist was filling her thoughts despite her efforts to fight it back.

"You will not." As he spoke, the clouds in her mind grew thicker until she was unable to form any more questions. "Think of it, little raven...what an appropriate name. To be immortal, to have such power — try to imagine that. Close your eyes and picture it." Gwennet obeyed, but she could see only darkness. "Now keep very still," he instructed, behind her now and to one side. "Be still and have no fear."

Her knees buckled then and he caught her in one arm, placing the palm of his hand against her neck. Eyes still closed, she let her head fall back, trusting Crassus to support her as her own muscles no longer would.

She was barely aware of the sharp pain stabbing into her neck; then she was aware of nothing at all.

\*

Hunger drove Gwennet to wakefulness, hunger such as she had never imagined. Opening her eyes, she saw the root cellar of Morag's cottage, every detail as clear as day, clearer than it had been by the flickering light of the oil lamp.

"Welcome back, little raven." Crassus' voice seemed very loud, though he was not shouting.

Slowly she got to her feet, surprised at her steadiness though she could not recall why it should be a problem. She ought to say something, she realized, but only one thought would form coherently. "I'm thirsty," she told Crassus. She had meant to say "hungry," but somehow that seemed wrong. The distinction between hunger and thirst was blurred, but both were tearing at her insides, demanding to be satisfied.

"I'm sure you are," he said. "We will take care of that soon, Gwennet. Come with me now."

She took his outstretched hand, following him out of the cellar. "I'm hungry," she tried again.

"I know," Crassus assured her. "It's time to feed," he explained, leading her in the door of the cottage. Leaning close to her ear, he murmured, "It's time to kill."

The significance of his words could not get through to her; only the twisting hunger-thirst mattered as Morag turned from her fireplace and rose to greet them.

"Where have you been, Lady?" the healer asked in concern. "You should have been resting, not..." Morag trailed off, reaching up to touch Gwennet's face, her expression one of disbelief. "How—?"

"She was resting," Crassus said, standing behind the midwife and clamping his hands on her shoulders. "Your little raven is hungry, Morag," he whispered, looking at Gwennet with a knowing smile.

"Care for your princess, old woman. Feed her."

Morag looked confused, again reaching out to touch Gwennet's face. "The bruises..."

Instinctively Gwennet seized the old woman's wrist, hearing the brittle bones crunch in her grip. Another sound had been worming its way into her consciousness, a dull pound-POUND that was growing faster and more insistent, and now she became aware that its rhythm matched the pulse beneath her fingers. She was hearing the crone's heartbeat as if it were a drum!

"Take her, Gwennet," Crassus whispered. "Her life to feed yours. To help you into this world as she did into the one you have left behind."

She found herself fascinated by the stark terror on Morag's face, drained of all color. "What has happened to you, little raven?" the wise-woman whispered harshly. "Where is the child I knew?"

"She's dead." Crassus' finger traced the artery up Morag's neck, drawing Gwennet's attention to the pulsepoint. The heartbeat filling her ears was racing now, and the strange thirst-hunger wrenched at her as she thought of the blood running beneath the wrinkled skin.

Twining his fingers in the wispy grey hair, Crassus pulled her head back, pinning her motionless with his eyes as she looked up at him. "Gwennet, take her!" he repeated. "Drink, little raven. Feed your hunger."

The heartbeat pounded in her head and she could think of nothing but thirst, her mind swirling with a strange, rich scent. Something inside her knew what to do, and she buried her face in the woman's neck, piercing the skin with teeth too long to be hers and greedily filling the hungry space inside her with the rush of warmth.

The dizzy moment was all too brief, fading as the midwife's heart fell silent. Her desperate hunger was stilled, but she could feel it coiled within her like a serpent ready to strike; and she could feel the last traces of the intoxication of satisfying it.

She wanted to do it again.

"It isn't finished, Gwennet." Crassus' voice startled her; she had forgotten he was there.

"There is more?" she asked, her voice betraying her eagerness.

"There will always be more," he answered, lowering Morag's limp body to the floor and motioning for Gwennet to kneel with him. "Always and forever. We can kill again tonight — but first you must finish this one."

He took hold of her hands, placing them on either side of the old woman's head. "Twist," he ordered simply. She did so, effortlessly producing a loud *snap* as the neck broke. She had never possessed such strength!

"To make certain she does not return to be one of us," he explained. "We choose our converts very carefully, Gwennet." He stood up, holding out his hand to her. "Are you still afraid?"

"No," she lied.

Crassus merely smiled. "You cannot hide the truth from me. Come — I know how to drown your fears, and your doubts. I know what you need."

He pulled her toward the door, but she hesitated, nodding at the corpse. "What about—?"

"It's not our concern. We will never return here." He led her out of the cottage. "Come, you have much to learn."

\*

"No," Gwennet said flatly, staring apprehensively at Draxo's villa. "Why have you brought us here? I swore I'd never set foot in that bastard's house again!"

"Trust me," Crassus returned. "I think you will find great...satisfaction in this visit."

Gwennet frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Follow my lead; you will see."

She did so, seeing no other choice. She feared to leave him; he had said she had much to learn, and no doubt many important lessons remained. The power he had given her must be controlled, he said; and after using it to travel here on the wings of the wind she had no doubt of it.

The image of Morag's crumpled body on the floor of the cottage sprang unbidden to her mind and

she banished it, shuddering slightly. She was no longer one of them, she reminded herself, and that would never change.

So far, though, they were just words. She could barely comprehend flying, or her sudden great strength; she could not begin to internalize the notion that she would never die, or the fact that she had taken Morag's life like some vicious animal.

On reflection, maybe it would be better if she never did.

\*

"Gaius Marcellus Draxo." Crassus did not raise his voice, or at least Gwennet did not think so; it was difficult to tell when she was not yet accustomed to this new sharpness of her senses. Certainly he made no effort to shout over Draxo's excessive grunting and gasping, but the quiet words served to jolt him off an equally startled Luciana and make both of them forget for the moment the activity they were enthusiastically pursuing.

Gaius Marcellus found his voice first, managing to strip it of most of the fear that stared out of both pairs of eyes. "What is this, Aquila? You made your bargain, the slut's yours. Now get her and yourself out of my house and I might not have you arrested!"

"My bargain is sealed," Crassus agreed in the same calm voice. "But she still has a score to settle. Haven't you, Gwennet?"

The look he shot her spoke as clearly as words: *Show no weakness*. She must not let Draxo see her uncertainty of Crassus' plans. "Two scores," she amended, glaring meaningfully at the terrified Luciana before turning her attention back to Draxo. "But there is no way to count pain, to know the tally that I owe you."

She looked to Crassus for approval, and he nodded with a smile that had no hope of reaching his eyes. "No doubt your best guess will be sufficient. I think you should repay his favors first, don't you?" He turned the smile on Luciana. "And you may watch."

Uttering a strangled cry that by rights should not have emerged from a human being, Luciana bolted across the room, paying little heed to her rumpled clothing. Gwennet was not surprised to see that she did not get far. Crassus gripped the girl tightly by the shoulders, turning her to face her master and whispering in her ear, "Keep still and watch, and I will not break your neck." Wild-eyed, Luciana obeyed, and Crassus nodded toward Draxo. "He's yours, Gwennet. Forget the law; you have the power to do as you wish. Let him taste the suffering he has caused." His voice dropped to an intense whisper. "Let him bathe in it."

She hesitated for a long moment, and Gaius Marcellus took it as an opportunity to try to regain control of the situation. He started to get up from the bed, and decisively Gwennet pinned his gaze with her own. "Stay where you are," she ordered, his heartbeat sounding through her skull as she savored this new power. He froze, and Gwennet started forward very deliberately. "You are the slave now, Roman. You belong to me."

She had dreamed a dozen ways to destroy him, and the knowledge that she could now fulfill any of them was more inebriating than the dizzy heat of the old woman's blood. When she reached the end of the bed, she began to crawl across the cushions toward her former master, keeping the same leisurely pace. Draxo continued to stare at her, unable to look away or to move though his eyes clearly saw his death coming toward him.

They held something else, too, and Gwennet laughed as she recognized it. "So you still lust for me, Gaius Marcellus?" she purred, a vicious parody of the tone she had used on scores of his stupid, sweaty houseguests. "Still want me as a thing to use and control and hurt. Use me up and throw me away as you did my mother..." A thought struck her as she wound her finger in a curl of his hair — touched with silver, but still mostly finespun shadow that matched her own — and a low, mocking laugh bubbled in the back of her throat. "I wonder why I never thought of that before. She was your favorite, wasn't she, wound up in your bed more often than any other. Was I born of your seed, Gaius Marcellus, planted in this very bed? Now there's a pretty picture."

He made an answer of sorts, a thin whine like a starving child, and she laughed again. The whites showed all around his eyes, and he took gasping, hitching breaths; and his heartbeat was so loud she was certain there was nothing else to hear. "The circle is closing, *dominus*," she whispered, making the title a curse. Running a hand up his chest, she gave him a brilliant smile, continuing, "I learned the harlot's wiles under your roof, all the power I was allowed to have. Do you think I learned them well?" Gaius Marcellus responded with an uneasy moan, closing his eyes as her hand slid up his throat and twined into his hair. He offered no resistance as she tipped his head back, the pulse in his throat dancing visibly, drawing her attention. The promise of the blood called to her, and she had to have it *now*—

It was ten times what it had been with the old woman, the blood of a man in his prime, seasoned by a depth of hatred that had surprised her and the euphoria of revenge. But it was over just as quickly, leaving her with only a slight drunken glow, nothing to the great glorious rush of Draxo's death. And this time she could look on it coldly and know that she had brought death. She ought to feel remorse, perhaps; but this was after all what she *was*. It had driven her without thought, even to snapping his neck in the swirl of everything else, not a thing she could stand against. Did it really matter whether or not she wanted to stand against it?

Gradually she became aware of Luciana's uneven babbling, and that Crassus was not silencing her. She turned to see her treacherous former friend holding out the stolen torque, blubbering, "I'm sorry, Gwennet, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, I know this is yours, but he — but he, I couldn't refuse him, I know I was jealous but—"

"Quiet," Crassus murmured in Luciana's ear. "None of that matters now. Keep still." She obeyed, and he plucked the torque from her hand as it dropped back to her side. Tossing it to Gwennet with a smile, he turned back to the wretched girl and dispatched her so swiftly that even Gwennet's new perceptions could scarcely follow it.

"No!" She owed Luciana, and suddenly Luciana was beyond her reach. "Why did you do that?" she demanded, striding across the room to Crassus.

"Don't be greedy, Gwennet," he responded mildly. "We have been too long here already, and after all I must feed as well."

"But she was mine!"

"And I took her." His steady gaze clearly challenged her to make an issue of it, a chill note of anger creeping into his voice. "You're being childish. Surely you know that nothing comes without a price."

"You said I was free," Gwennet accused.

Crassus smiled; she was beginning to despise it. "And so you are. Free forever, of the stupid base desires of Draxo and those like him. But I am the master now."

"You lied to me!"

"Get used to it." Before she could recover from her shock enough to respond to that, he went on, "You are a child, Gwennet. You wouldn't last two nights without me. Now come, before they discover us. I am not in the mood for a scene."

Choking back her anger, knowing he was right — what did she really know of what she had become, or how to continue? — she answered quietly, "Just a moment." Kneeling beside Luciana's body, she placed the torque back around the other's neck. "You lose, Luciana," she hissed. "This is a thing, nothing more, and gives me no pleasure. Maybe it will make you a princess in the underworld. May you have joy of it." As she stood, she could feel the new laws of her life settling on her. She would learn. She would survive.

Her storehouse of tears would never fall.

Toronto, 1992

The unexpected, unwanted tumble of memory had long since played itself out, leaving a bitter taste in her mind as she watched the club's lights spin their dizzy dance in the glass before her.

"Hey, gorgeous, didn't Mom ever tell you not to drink alone?"

Janette's smile lit up automatically for the young man who had boldly occupied the chair across from her at the tiny table. "I don't believe she ever did," she answered truthfully. "But I'm not alone, am I?"

*She's been everybody else's girl  
Maybe one day she'll be her own  
—Tori Amos, "Girl"*

-The End-

[Look for other "**Forever Knight**" tales by Valerie Meachum in earlier issues of **Good Guys Wear Fangs**, and numerous other "zine" publications. Upcoming in a future issue of GGWF: the long-awaited sequel to "Further to Fall," a Nick & Nat "happily ever after" story.]



## **FAIT ACCOMPLI**

*by Denysé M. Bridger*

*he arrives*

*they dance attendance on a presence  
that rivals royalty  
his eyes are everywhere  
assessing the madness he incites  
by merely being  
his amusement is cool  
disdain cloaked in charm  
contempt veiled and  
concealed behind fathomless  
ocean blue eyes*

*he invites*

*beckons with false warmth  
always in search of the one spirit  
that will challenge him  
arouse the madness he craves  
to experience  
his hunger is real  
buried beneath urbane grace  
tamed by and  
hidden within ancient  
sapphire pools of wisdom*

*he finds her*

*they dance attendance on their fate  
king and queen of the night  
he sees none but her  
she glories in his madness  
by merely being  
at his side  
consort to a master she adores  
his hunger  
consumes them as they share  
their danse macabre*

*fire and ice*

*flame red hair haloed the vixen  
turns her seductress eyes  
the colour of emerald  
she claims her lover  
flaunts her prize  
before their envious looks  
delights in her power.  
his power  
the gift he allows  
return for enchantment*

*silver radiance*

*pale beauty defines the fallen angel  
turns indigo eyes  
to golden fire  
he chose well this time  
a maiden worthy of his honour  
he feels it in their angry stares  
revels in his control  
her control  
the gift she allows  
return for eternity*

*they merge*

*twin souls born for each other  
understanding  
spirits entwined as  
tightly as their coiled lovers bodies  
joined in a union  
no god could sanctify  
unholy alliance made pure  
their hunger sears all  
destiny met  
fait accompli*

**STARSKY & HUTCH** was a cop show that ran from 1975 to 1979. While it did have its fair share of "shoot 'em ups" and car chases (complete with Starsky's distinctive red and white-striped Torino), the lasting draw of the show has been the relationship between the two partners.

David Michael Starsky was originally from New York City. The son of a cop, he moved to Los Angeles as a child to live with an aunt and uncle after his father was shot down. Streetwise and cocky, Starsky acted on impulse and instinct. Just under six feet tall, he had dark blue eyes and a dark curly mop of hair that seemed to accent his energetic approach to life.

From Minnesota, little is known about Kenneth Hutchinson's family life except that he was once divorced sometime before the series began. Tall and blond with ice-blue eyes, Hutch appeared outgoing, but was beset by overworked introspection. There was some college in his background and some money, but how much of either was never mentioned.

If Starsky was more inclined to jump into situations where angels fear to tread, Hutch was just as likely to "think an idea to death," whether it meant an undercover scenario or his own personal relationships. But despite their different approaches to life, they usually arrived at the same solution to a problem, regardless of its nature.

Always ready to move in each other's defense, there was an emotional closeness between them that few of their collective women understood. And there were a lot of women. There was also a physical closeness in the series that included touches, pats, and jugs; their personal space seemed to include each other. It is surprising to watch whether in the 70's "macho" era or now.

One of the most notable episodes was the last. In "Sweet Revenge," Starsky was ambushed in the police garage, and teetered between life and death for most of the story. Hutch, in the meantime, almost single-handedly brings in Gunther, the head of the crime organization responsible. It is not only a case of watching Starsky suffer; you also watch Hutch unravel until it is a question of who will live longer: the victim or his avenging partner. They both survive, of course. But this one episode is a prime example of that peculiar S&H intimacy.

The nicknames Blintz and Dirtball are found in the series. For instance, Starsky came up with the Blond Blintz as a CB name for Hutch when they were undercover as truckers. His own self-proclaimed "handle" was Puce Goose. Perhaps we should be grateful that while the Blintz did resurface in later episodes, the Puce Goose was not heard of again.

## *Presentation*

*by*

*B.N. Fish*

*[This story takes place one week after "Lessons," which appeared in *Good Guys Wear Fangs 2*. It should also be noted that the Nick in this story is based upon the 1989 tv movie, *Nick Knight*, starring Rick Springfield, and thus has some important differences from the tv series. LaCroix is really dead, crusty Dr. Jack is Nick's friend and confidante rather than Natalie (and keeps closer tabs on him than Nat does her Nick!), and the relationship of Jeanette — who in this version is much colder than the Janette of *Forever Knight* — to Nick and LaCroix is never spelled out. And there are a great number of other blanks just waiting to be filled in — from the nature of vampire society in this world, to Nick's past and his and Janette's and LaCroix's age and origins. Enjoy.]*

Movement in my arms.

I didn't immediately identify my companion. But I was unconcerned. It was a familiar presence.  
All was quiet.

Lips moved from high on my chest to settle at the juncture at my neck.

Okay. I wasn't opposed to a kissing wake-up call.

Sure enough a tongue began to lap at my throat.

Not bad, some part of my groggy brain noted. This unknown bed partner of mine had a technique that had me leaning back to expose more of my neck to that talented mouth.

My arms tightened, as I felt an instant of pain and then a thrill of sucking.

"Yes," I groaned with pleasure, only vaguely noting the breadth of shoulders under my hands.  
The mouth stopped.

"More," I pleaded, attempting to pull the head with its fine hair back to my throat.

"Starsky?" came a weak, strangled cry.

"Hm?"

I, reluctantly, decided to open my eyes. Wild blond hair and frantic blue eyes greeted mine.

"Hutch?" I asked.

What was my partner doing here?

"Dear God, what have I done?" he said.

He pulled away and left me.

Where was I, anyway?

Blearily, I looked around.

I was on Hutch's couch.

Okay. That should mean that I was in Hutch's apartment, right? I mean it did make a certain amount of sense, didn't it?

Except—

Where was the lover with the great mouth? My partner hadn't had time to chase her off. So, where was she?

Had I dreamed her? Usually, any dreams on that lumpy sofa had more to do with Nazi tortures

than erotica.

And it had seemed so real. I sighed.

Hutch returned to the bed with a wash cloth, band-aids and peroxide.

"Whasha matter?" I asked, taking in the shaking hands and tight mouth. "...Whacha been eatin'?" I tried again, when he didn't answer. "You're gettin' sloppy, Blintz."

I pointed to a dribble of red coming from the corner of his mouth. I'd have said it was ketchup, but Hutch never touched the stuff.

"Will you stop that?" I grumbled, as I pushed away the cold, dripping material. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Ah, Starsky," he sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

"Why? Whatcha do?" I asked reasonably.

He touched my neck where my dream lover had been so busy. Then he held up his hand in front of my eyes.

"That's what I did."

I stared stupidly.

A crimson smear covered his fingers.

Blood.

My blood.

Kenneth Hutchinson, cool, collected, loyal friend and partner, had drunk my blood.

Hutch is a vampire, you know.

Okay, so he hadn't been at it very long. And we still didn't understand all of it yet. But that didn't mean he was supposed to use me like a public water fountain.

I watched, almost detached, as he tried to clean me up. I should have been upset or at least shocked. But I couldn't work up the anger. Hutch's hands trembled. His jaw was almost vibrating under the strain.

Say something, dummy, I told myself. Anything. "How's it look?" I said finally.

Yeah, I know, it's not Shakespeare. But ol' Willy never tried to cope with a Hutchinson for a partner, much less one that had just recently become a member of the "night people", permanently.

"I don't know," Hutch wavered. "I think maybe you should go to the hospital."

"Naw. I feel fine." I had to be fine. One of us falling apart around here was enough. "It doesn't even hurt," I went on. "Am I still bleedin'?"

"No..."

"Well, it's all right, then. Bandage me up and let's go," I said lightly.

"Dammit, Starsky. I just drank your blood. I didn't borrow your best tie."

Never let it be said that Hutch took the easy way out.

"At least you're admittin' that I have a best tie," I said. "Look, I'm fine. You're fine. We're all fine together. Where are you goin'?"

He stopped by the front door.

"I can't do it, Starsk," he said miserably. "I can't live like this."

"Sure you can."

I put him on his trusty couch. Let him enjoy his own lumps.

"Now sit down and behave yourself."

I started for the phone.

"You mean you don't want me to bite you again?" my partner said bitterly.

"Listen, Hutch, if it weren't for the fact that you're too tall and too flat-chested, I'd be draggin' you back to do it again."

"Starsky, you can't mean..."

"Listen, Blintz," I cut in. "I don't guess you noticed before, but I didn't want you to stop."

That's the part that should have really scared me.

"Was that before, or after, you found out what I was doing?" he snarled.

"Before," I admitted. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Of course I did," he snapped. "I'm a vampire, aren't I?"

"Did you know what you were doing? Did you know it was me?"

"No, Starsky. I swear..."

"Don't you think I know that? You know, partner, you're a smart man, but you got a long ways to go as a *nosferatu*."

I made it to the phone this time.

"What are you doing?" Hutch asked.

"Callin' in back-up."

A bell rang in my ear. Fortunately, it wasn't long before I got a voice.

"Hello?"

"Nick? This is Starsky."

"What's up?"

"Nothin' good. Can you come over to Hutch's, right now?"

"Do I have time to bring the Caddy?"

I glanced at my partner.

"No." We needed our master vampire right now.

"Do I have time to get dressed?"

Visions of naked vampires danced in my head.

"Yeah," I said. "But hurry, huh?"

"I'll put on essentials and bring the rest."

He hung up.

"Nick's on his way," I announced.

"And what is he going to do?" Hutch challenged. "Tell me it's normal? That it's instinct?"

There was anger and despair in his voice. And fear, fear for me.

If I let myself, I'd be afraid, too. But there was no time for it now.

"He's going to tell you that it's all right. Since you won't believe me, maybe you'll believe him. He's been our anchor in all this since the beginning, after all."

And while he was at it, he would hopefully tell me something that would cut the power to the buzz-saws trying to do somersaults in my stomach.

"What if I kill you next time?"

"Ain't never gonna happen."

Of that I was sure.

I had to be. If I lost the trust, we lost everything.

"You can't know that. I don't know that."

"I know you. I know you better than..."

"You *knew* me," he shook his head. "It's not the same as it was, Starsky. It can't be."

And what do I say to that?

The doorbell rang.

"We're okay, Hutch," I said, as I went to answer it.

It was Nick. He was carrying his jacket in one hand, his shoes and one sock in the other.

"What did you do? Fly?" I asked.

He lifted an eyebrow.

"Forget I said that," I grimaced.

"I'll try," he smiled, stepping inside.

I shut the door.

"Hutch is...," I began.

But Nick was staring at me, at my throat.

He knew.

"May I?" he asked, politely, transferring his jacket to his other arm, and extending his freed hand.

"I wish you would," I sighed. "And then tell him that I'm okay."

He touched my neck.

I seemed to lose track of things for a brief second, as I looked into his eyes. Then I was shaking my head, and I found Hutch at my elbow.

"How is he?" my partner asked.

"He's fine," Nick said. "And you should have..."

He stopped, as he studied Hutchinson for the first time that night.

"So that's it," the young man sighed, dropping shoes and clothes. "Sit down, Hutch. Let me get on both socks, at least."

"I don't want to sit down. I want out of this nightmare," my partner hissed.

"Do you?" Nick asked quietly.

Now, wait a minute.

"Yes!" Hutch growled.

"What about Starsky?"

"I almost killed Starsky."

I spoke up. "But you didn't."

"But he could have," the young man said.

"Hey, whose side are you on?" I questioned. This kind of help I could do without.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Nick asked my partner.

"I couldn't..." Hutchinson stammered. "It's Starsky."

Nick nodded. "Why did you start?"

"Because I'm a bloodsucker!"

"Meaning that you intentionally went after his blood?" Knight asked calmly.

"No, of course not."

"How did it happen then?"

"I...don't know," Hutch began bewildered. "Starsky was on the couch. ...I was in my bedroom. And then...I was here...with him...drinking...."

"What do you remember, Starsky?" the young man asked.

"I was dreamin'...about a woman, I thought," I said, trying to put what I had felt into words. "Even before she got to my throat, she was..." I hesitated. "She was somethin' else," I sputtered out.

"Did you feel him bite you?"

"Yeah, I think so. But then...it was terrific. I wanted more," I grinned weakly.

"And when you found out it was me?" Hutch asked sharply.

I squinted at him. "...I didn't know you were that good a kisser."

My partner groaned.

Good.

"And how did you feel?" Nick persisted.

"Just fine. It was as if I knew who it was, even if I didn't know. I wasn't in any danger."

"And you?" Knight asked Hutch. "Before you realized what was happening."

"I don't know," my partner shook his head. "I don't remember much. I was lonely. Isolated."

Nick nodded. "So, you went hunting for someone to be with. You're lucky to have Starsky to hold on to. It can be pretty scary in the early days. So many things change..."

"Was it that way for you?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Although I had it better than most. If there was an easy way to come across, it was for me. LaCroix took his time. He tried to explain it all beforehand. He gave me a choice. Certainly more than you had," Nick said to Hutch.

"Must be nice," my partner sighed.

"It was. It was a good life for a long time."

I couldn't help but wonder what had changed that "good life".

"As for crawling into bed with someone, for company," Knight went on, "I did it whenever I could. I was safe with him, and I needed that illusion of safety."

Illusion?

"LaCroix would tell me, 'This should not become a habit.' But he never sent me away. He was always there for me when I was afraid, or hurt, or...whatever."

"You were...ah," I faltered.

What was I saying? Didn't Hutch and me get enough sly remarks from the up and sundry without doing the same to somebody else?

But Nick seemed to understand and took no offense.

"We weren't lovers," he said. "Although master and fledgling usually are. I know it was true of his other initiates. It's certainly true for me and my two before you. It's just not a foregone conclusion."

"Obviously," said Hutch.

"Obviously," Nick agreed. "But now, even if either one of us were so inclined, it would be difficult for us to be sexually intimate. Not impossible. But difficult and dangerous."

"More difficult than you know," my partner said. "But dangerous?"

"All the strong emotions, whether love, or lust, or hate, are all intertwined with blood. Not just the *needing* of it, but the *wanting* of it. Bloodlust. And human blood is the sweetest of all. We thrive on it."

"See there, Hutch," I quipped. "I'm better than vitamins."

Nick smiled.

My partner glared.

"Then Starsky isn't safe," he said.

"Whadda ya mean 'isn't safe'?" I sputtered.

"He's safe enough," Nick said.

"You just said..." My partner growled.

"I said the hunger is always there. You had never fed of a mortal before. But you realized what was happening and you stopped."

"See? What more can you ask?" I put in.

"That it not happen at all."

"Then don't let it," Nick shrugged.

Was it really that simple?

The partner sure didn't look convinced.

"No, it's not easy," Knight conceded. "But...it might be for the best."

"What do you mean, for the best?!" Hutch demanded.

"*His* best," Knight continued, pointing at me.

"And just how do you figure that?!"

"...I'd be happy to tell you if you'll stop yelling," Nick said quietly.

Me, too.

My partner seldom loses his cool. It's one of the most admirable, and unnerving, things about him. I'm the one most apt to fly off the handle. But Hutch tends toward a thinking-type anger. That's the most dangerous of all. But right now he was closer to almost outright hysteria than I had seen in a long time.

It wasn't long enough.

"Sit down, Hutch," came a whispered voice. "*And listen.*"

Hutch sat. But he had the most peculiar expression on his face. The worry was still there, but now there was also a certain amount of panic.

Why?

A glance at Nick showed a sadness.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What happened?" I asked. "...Hutch?"

My partner shook his head.

"You can," Nick began slowly, still staring at Hutch, "fight it."

"Yeah, like I did just now," my partner said bitterly.

"The only reason it happened was because you were unprepared."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" the blond spat out.

"What is goin' on?" I squeezed in edgewise.

And was promptly ignored.

"Is everything I say suspect now?" Knight asked. "It was a mistake and I regret it. But if you can't trust me any more, I'll leave."

"Will someone tell me what happened?!" I thundered.

"...I commanded him," Nick said softly.

"What?" I got out, still not understanding.

"I ordered him to do something, and he obeyed."

"You can do that?" I asked.

"I can," Nick answered sadly.

"Hutch?"

"You better believe he can." He turned to Nick. "Is this the freedom you promised? What's the difference between this and slavery with Miranda?"

That had been the other alternative to Nick bringing him across.

Our senior vampire sighed. "You're right. There's no excuse."

Knight got to his feet and headed back toward the front door.

"Now wait a minute," I sputtered out. "You can't go just like that."

"Maybe it's what's meant to be. You know what you need to. You'll be okay."

"You said we needed a month to learn about bein' a vampire," I said. "And that, only if everythin' went okay. I don't call this goin' okay. And one measly week ain't no month."

"Let him go, Starsky," Hutch put in gruffly.

"Not on your life," I shot back. "Not for your life."

"But he's right," Nick said. "What can I do, if he doesn't trust me? I don't trust me. You wondered why I haven't brought more across. This is one of the reasons. I'm not any good at it. I've lost every one I've ever done...one way or another."

Think fast, Starsky. "Then make him forgive you."

"What?!"

Talk about stereo effect.

"You said you can command him. Make Hutch forgive you. Or better yet, make him forget the whole thing."

"Gentle coercion is still coercion, Starsky. And what do I do then? Make you forget?"

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Will you forgive, if I force him...to do anything?"

Hutch spoke up. "You can do that?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly?" my partner questioned.

"Do you really want to find out?" Nick answered him.

Hmm.

"Which can you do?" Hutch persisted. "The forgiving or the forgetting?"

"Both."

Stunned silence.

"...What *can't* you do?" I demanded.

"Undo what I've done."

Oh.

Nick opened the front door.

Time for the big guns. "What about me?" I blurted out.

Knight considered and then asked, suspiciously, "...What *about* you?"

"What do I tell him, after you're gone, an' he remembers that he drank my blood?"

Awkwardly put, but the whole set-up was awkward. Why can't rapid-fire conversations give you time to work out your answers ahead of time, I'd like to know?

"It's why I called you in the first place," I reminded him.

"So you did," Nick conceded. "Well, Hutch, it's up to you. Are you willing to listen to what I have to say?"

"What is there to say?" my partner grumbled.

"That it was inevitable."

"What? That I kill him?"

"Not kill. Taste. There is a difference."

"What difference?" I asked. "I ain't no bottle of booze."

"No, you're a friend, a mortal friend. Mortals and immortals generally don't mix that well. Something has to give. Usually it's the mortal."

"Does that mean that you and Dr. Farrell...?" I asked.

"You've actually...," Hutch put it.

"No," Nick cut us both off. "Jack and I are not what you two are."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?!" my partner demanded.

"It means that we're not you," Nick shrugged. "I check in with Jack every night. But I don't see him every night. And I certainly don't work in close proximity with him most of my waking hours."

"...So, what you're saying is that...," I began.

Knight held up his hand to forestall me.

"I'm saying that you two are unique. Your affinity for each other is well-known and justified. To work together as long, and as well, as you have indicates an intimacy that almost precludes the possibility that Starsky would have stayed completely mortal."

"Completely?" I asked. "I know I'm not a vampire, but I can still die. Right?"

"Even Hutch can still die," Nick countered. "But he has to be killed. You can still die of natural causes. That eventuality has just been put back a while."

"How far back?" Hutch asked.

"Ten, maybe twenty years."

"An' if it happens again?" I asked.

"That much more. But a lot depends on how much blood is involved, how often it happens, and so on..."

"Well, that's one way to get to a hundred and forty-seven," I muttered thoughtfully.

"Is that what you meant when you said it was for the best? Me doing Starsky, I mean," Hutch asked.

"Well, it is an asset, isn't it?"

"What's the rest of it?" my partner demanded.

And they say I'm the impatient part of this team. But I knew Hutch was still worried about me.

"Because you are so much in each other's company, Starsky could conceivably become known as your weakness, if he had remained a true mortal."

"A true mortal?" I questioned.

"In a lot of ways you're like Hutch was in the beginning with Miranda. You've not been taken as many times, or as deeply, and certainly not with the same intent, but..."

"My motives were so noble, of course," Hutch grated out.

"You didn't mean to hurt him. Human blood is sweet. And the blood of a friend," Nick said, looking at me, "of someone you care about, is the sweetest of all."

I shook my head. "Okay, so I'm a tasty little tidbit. What does that have to do with Miranda?"

"The situation may be different but the terms still apply. Hutch is the immortal. You are not. Hutch is the master, you are the initiate. No matter how much further the two of you take this, the blood link exists."

"You mean," I began with a glance at my partner, "that Hutch can do what Miranda did."

"Not quite," Knight said. "There hasn't been enough blood."

"How do you know?" Hutch demanded.

"I know, as you probably could, if you would only look at Starsky objectively."

My partner sighed, "I'm not sure there was ever a time when I could look at him...as anyone other than Starsky."

"Irresistible, that's me," I grinned.

"That's not quite the word I would have used," Hutch muttered.

Nick smiled.

"So, what can he do?" I asked.

"He can summon you over maybe twenty, thirty miles."

Summon?

"You can resist it. But you'll know if ever he calls you."

Like Miranda.

Hutch and me stared at each other.

"Can I hear him?" my partner asked suddenly.

What?

"Ordinarily, I'd say no. But with you two, I can't be sure."

"Why not? What's so special about us?" I asked. I had my own answer, but that didn't mean it would jive with Nick's.

"Usually the link feeds on itself. The link exists because of the blood. The blood happens because of the link."

Huh?

"For you, the link is not the only thing you have in common. You have many years, and layers of friendship, between you. I think you'll find that bond between you even stronger now."

"Because of the blood," Hutch said.

"I think so. But only you can know."

To be even closer to Hutch. Was that possible? Sometimes it seemed as if we were in the same skin already. But to know when he was in trouble, like when he was trapped under the first LTD, or when Forester had him... I could get to like that.

"Is that all of it, then?" my partner asked.

"What?"

"All the great reasons for me biting him."

"Hutch, will you shut up?" I said.

"Well, there is something more," Knight said.

"...And we aren't going to like it, are we?" I asked.

"That's definitely possible," Nick admitted.

"I don't think I want to know," Hutch said.

"It'll keep," Knight shrugged.

"Oh no, you don't," I growled. "Spit it out and get it over with."

Nick turned to my partner.

"Well?" he asked.

Hutch gave me one of his patented Starsky-do-we-have-to? looks.

"I want to know," I answered. "And you need to."

"Okay, okay," the blond sighed. He turned to Nick. "Go ahead."

"...Have you two eaten?"

I recognized the delaying tactic.

"Come to think of it, no," I said, suddenly hungry. I headed for the kitchen. "...Don't vampires ever wake up like normal people?" I asked, while I clattered around with mugs, spoons, bottles, and the good old microwave.

"How do you mean?" Nick asked quietly.

"You know, crabby and groggy. I mean, he's..." I poked at Hutch. "...got the crabby part down pat. But don't you know that crises aren't supposed to happen until after your first cup of coffee, or in your case, cup of protein?"

The microwave dinged and I pushed two steaming mugs into two other sets of hands.

"Thank you," said Knight.

"Be careful," Hutch warned. "He gets it too hot."

"You can always do it yourself, you know," I said absently, as I went hunting for something more solid.

"...Is it that bad?" I heard my partner ask.

I looked up to watch Nick.

"Not necessarily. You do have a choice."

"You mean like the last one?"

The one where Hutch could become a vampire or a "slave". Some choice.

"Well, it's not that extreme."

"Glad to hear it," I mumbled around some whole wheat bread.

I had to get some edible food over here from my place, like chocolate pop tarts or something.

"As choices go, yours leave a lot to be desired," Hutchinson said.

"Think of it as being part of my persuasive style," Nick came back with.

"You musta been a whiz on the debate team in high school," I said.

Nick shook his head. "...When I was about a month into the Life, LaCroix took me to the Gallery."

"Hmm?" I said, looking up from my bowl of granola. Blah. Back to Nick and his explanation. It looked to me like the explanation was going to need an explanation.

"What kind of gallery?" Hutch asked.

"It was a gathering place for the immortals in the city, in Paris."

"He wanted to show you off to his friends," I said.

"Possibly," Nick shrugged. "LaCroix said he wanted me to learn how to deal with other immortals before a time might come when I would *have* to deal with them."

"Did you ever have to?" Hutch asked. "Deal with them, I mean."

"A few times. Personally, I think he wanted me to meet Lorraine."

"Lorraine?"

"She was his teacher."

"Teacher?" my partner questioned. "You mean his master...er, mistress?"

"No. His master died the day after he was brought across. LaCroix didn't even know what had happened to him. Somehow he survived until Lorraine found him and took care of him." Nick shook his head, "...Sorry. Reminiscence isn't much good to you. The point is that there's a place like the Gallery here."

"And you want me to go there?" my partner asked.

"I think it would be a good idea, although for different reasons."

"What's the matter?" I bristled. "You ain't proud of him?"

"I'm pleased as punch with him, Starsky." Then he spoke to Hutch. "You are doing very well. You're a lot stronger than I was at this stage."

"I find that hard to believe," the blond shrugged.

"Believe it."

"He's probably older than you were," I put in. "Isn't he?"

"I guess you're right. I hadn't thought about it."

It made sense. Age would be pretty immaterial to an immortal.

"How old was that?" Hutch asked.

"Twenty-two."

"Well, that might account for it then," I said.

Hutch and me are forty-eight.

"Maybe."

Nick didn't believe it.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I grew up on the streets of Paris. I wasn't exactly an innocent when I met LaCroix. Twenty-two was reasonably mature in my time."

Hmm.

"Why, then?" Hutch asked.

"What?"

"If it's not because you're proud of me, even if you are," my partner added with a dismissive wave of his hand, "why should we go?"

"Because they know about you." Nick turned to me. "And you."

"An' that ain't good?" I asked.

"Well, it's virtually impossible for them not to know that there's a new member of the People about," Knight shrugged. "The problem is they know *how* you came about. We need to let them know that you are not a victim anymore, that you're strong and well able to defend yourself."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"It's also good manners. Something like the Welcome Wagon in reverse."

Hutch frowned. "...When?"

"...Tonight?" Nick offered tentatively.

"What?!"

The young man winced at our double voices.

"The sooner begun," he went on, "the sooner done, as my mother used to tell me."

Mothers don't change much through the centuries, do they?

I watched my partner. Reluctance was the paramount expression in the broad face, that and doubt, and worry and don't forget the guilt around the edges. His next question confirmed it.

"What about Starsky?" Hutch asked.

"That's the main reason why your marking him is a blessing."

"What do you mean *marking*," I sputtered. "I ain't no cow."

"No," Nick agreed. "But for an unmarked mortal to enter a gathering of vampires is to court disaster. It's something on the order of fools rushing in."

"Meaning he's safe now?" the blond asked.

"Meaning he's safer. The bleeding means that some immortal has taken an interest in him. He's not a free agent."

"Wanna bet?" I challenged.

"That you can decide between you. I'm talking about appearances. It's like moving in on another man's wife. To mess with another immortal's initiate is generally frowned upon. It doesn't mean it doesn't happen. But they'll think twice about it."

"So, he is safe," my partner insisted.

"As he can be. Short of becoming immortal himself. Yes."

"Hey, now," I protested. "We ain't starting a string of shoe stores here."

"Good enough," Nick nodded. "Look, we won't be staying that long. Just a brief tour through some of the rooms, a few words if anyone bothers to talk to us, and then we're gone."

"If there's not that much to it, then why do it?" Hutchinson asked.

"So they can see you, dummy," I said.

"And know that you're not afraid," Knight added.

"Afraid?" Hutch questioned. "How about terrified?"

"Good," Nick smiled. "But you don't want them to know that. You want them to see that you've progressed beyond being simply Miranda's blood toy."

"Blood toy?"

The young man lifted his hands.

He had said we probably wouldn't like the terminology.

"So...what do I wear to this thing?" my partner asked, as he huddled in his bathrobe.

"Whatever you want to. The current style is 'California elegance'."

"Which can run anywhere from cut-offs to tuxedos," I put in.

"Pretty much," Nick agreed. "Whatever you feel good in, whatever you feel you look good in."

"And they will be looking, won't they?"

"That's the idea."

"We want them to look *at* him," I said, "not *for* him. Right?"

"Right. Tell you what." Then Knight spoke to Hutch. "You go in and change into whatever suits you. Then Starsky and I will change to suit you."

"Kind of a united front, huh?" I said.

The young man nodded.

Hutch sighed. "Okay."

He disappeared into his bedroom.

Nick started attending to his neglected shoes and socks.

"You sure he's ready for this?" I whispered to Nick, as I pulled on my own clothes.

Knight grinned. "Oh, he's ready all right," he said in a normal voice. "He's really quite formidable."

"He's bull-headed is what he is."

"That, too. But that's part of his strength. His belief in who he is. Not so much what he is, because I know he's not quite adapted to that yet. But above and before all, he is Ken Hutchinson, cop and partner."

"And that's good, huh?" I asked, not really needing confirmation. I believed it, but it never hurt to have a second opinion to back you up.

"You know it is, Starsky. Or do you think he's changed?"

He looked at me strangely. I studied him. But his face revealed nothing.

"You're testing me," I said finally.

"Maybe. I can't test one of you without the other. You're too much a part of him. So, do you think he's changed?" he asked again.

I turned away. Of course, Hutch had changed. The wake-up call was only part of it.

"Starsky?"

"He has changed."

"And?" Nick prompted.

And what? What was I supposed to do? Leave him? "Impossible," I said aloud. I turned back to face Knight. "I can live with it."

Nick nodded and finished up his shoes.

"...Can you read my mind?" I asked. "I know you can Hutch, kinda, 'cause of the blood. But me?"

"...Kinda," he smiled, standing up.

"Huh?" If that was supposed to be reassuring, we were in big trouble.

The bedroom door opened then. Hutch came out wearing his white suit.

"Well," he said nervously, turning the hat in his hands. "Will this do it?"

"You look fine," said Nick.

I took in the royal blue silk shirt open at the throat and the tan boots.

"Starsk?"

"Well, I don't know," I said, with a critical eye. "After all, this is your debutante's ball." I walked slowly around him. "Everything should be perfect," I grinned, as I brushed off an imaginary piece of lint. ...I guess you'll get by."

Hutch glared at me.

I wisely decided to forego any further comment, before he killed me. Rephrase that. Before he knocked me flat.

"You two go to Starsky's," Nick said, "and I'll meet you there."

"Got it," I agreed.

Knight moved away.

"Oh, and a word of warning," he said, looking back. "We will be flying."

"Why?" I asked. "To show how much he can do?"

"Or for a fast get-away?" my partner asked.

"Both."

And he disappeared through the door.

"I wish he wouldn't do that," I mumbled, staring where Nick had just been.

"Do what? Be honest? Come on, Starsky. Let's get a move on. No matter how well I'm doing, he still moves faster than we do."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, grabbing up my jacket and moving out.

Door locked, down the steps and into the Torino. It wasn't that long a trip to my place. I was rifling through my closet, before Hutch brought it up again.

"What do you wish Nick wouldn't do?" he asked.

My head was deep inside a corner looking for a navy shirt I knew had to be there, but wasn't turning up.

"Work so hard at keeping himself distant from us," I said. "I mean, I appreciate him lettin' us work out some of the stuff for ourselves, but there are times when I wish he'd hang around more. ...Here we go."

The elusive shirt appeared. I scrambled to get dressed.

"Just as long as he's there tonight," said my partner.

"Nervous?" I asked.

"Why, no. What do I have to be nervous about? I just..."

"Shut up, Blintz," I cut in.

His mouth closed with a snap.

"Lookit, we got enough problems here, we don't need you to make yourself one of 'em. Besides...we're going to dazzle 'em tonight."

Dressed at last, I turned around to show off my own wardrobe. I knew I looked good in light blue and navy.

I saw Hutch control a smile of approval.

"See there," I crowed. "They ain't got a chance."

"Maybe," he admitted, "but shaving wouldn't hurt either."

"Oh," I said, only just now remembering. "Yeah."

I shed my jacket and headed for the bathroom. While in there, I heard a distant door buzzer and then Hutch mumbling through the door. It had to be Nick.

I hurried along. I was curious to see what our vampire leader would be wearing. So, freshly scraped and shining, I came out and claimed my jacket again. Then I stepped out into my living room.

The young man was just putting down a large gym bag. He was dressed entirely in black. Black gabardine slacks, boots, a deep scooped vest and dark flowing shirt, set off by his dark hair. Over it all he wore a voluminous cape that fell to just above his ankles. The whole effect made him almost a stranger, hardly at all that unobtrusive friend that had been with us for more than a week.

"Wow!" I said eloquently.

Nick looked at me and seemed to study my expression. Who knows what he was picking up from it.

"Is that good or bad?" he asked, as he unsnapped his cloak.

"Good," I said quickly. "It's just that you look so...different," I added lamely.

"For the better, I hope," he smiled.

"You look ominous," Hutch said.

I don't know if I would have put it that way. But it did fit. Nick looked older now. And quite capable.

"Hopefully, that will be to our advantage," Knight shrugged, swirling off the cloak with a practiced hand.

"And the cape," I said. "You actually do wear a cape."

"So?"

"So, you ain't hardly Bela Lugosi. But I always kinda thought of vampires as wearing capes a lot."

"Well, to be honest, I brought it for Hutch."

"Aha, now you'll have the proper uniform," I grinned at my partner.

All I got was a raised eyebrow out of him.

Harumph.

"And one for you," Nick added, pointing to me, "if you needed it. Which you do."

"Me? I ain't even a vampire-in-training. ...Am I?" I suddenly considered.

"In a distant way, you are," Knight said. "But that's not the reason."

"What, then?" Hutch asked.

"You're both wearing light colors."

"Ain't it allowed?" I asked.

"Anything's allowed, as you'll soon find out. But those suits will show up at night, specifically in the night sky."

"Oh."

"Should we change?" Hutch asked.

"It's not necessary. The cloaks will take care of it."

Our leader pulled out a mass of dark cloth from that bag.

"Here you go," he said, presenting it to me.

"What about Hutch's hair?" I asked, as I fumbled with the thing. "If our suits can be seen, that blond head's gonna shine like a light house."

"There are hoods," Knight said abruptly. "You ready to go?"

Hutch and me looked at each other.

"...As I'm going to get," my partner sighed.

"Yeah. Me, too."

"Let's get to it, then."

We went out back and got into position. Hutch and Nick went on either side of me and linked arms behind my back. I then locked my arms around necks and shoulders, all the while stepping on two different sets of feet.

It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was the best and simplest way we'd come up with so far. It was the most solid for me, being the only non-flyer of the bunch. I also had a sneaking suspicion that this way Nick could stabilize Hutch without being obvious about it. My partner might have accepted flying as being an expedient way of travel, but he still wasn't crazy about heights.

\*

We came down in a large flagstoned courtyard surrounded by a low rock wall. Beyond it I saw a few gleaming cars.

"Maybe next time, Starsky," came Hutch's voice.

I raised my best eyebrow. Somebody could read somebody's mind.

Nick led the way down the path and up some marble steps.

"Just what is this place?" Hutch asked, as he looked over the grounds.

Flower gardens nestled up to the slate walls of a huge building with long narrow windows. The front door was tall enough to give entry to the second floor. A leaded window above it revealed a faceted ball of light.

"It was an old movie studio originally," Knight explained. "It's been converted, remodeled and added on to."

"I would say so," my partner nodded.

"Yeah." My contribution to the conversation.

I expected a doorman to appear. But we were left to push open the door to make our own entry.

"You can leave your cloaks here," Nick said, indicating a darkened room to the side. "Don't worry about leaving them, if it comes up."

"You're really worried about this, aren't cha?" I asked, hanging up my trusty drape.

"Just hope they don't notice it," Nick said in a lowered voice.

"If it's that bad, then why are we here?" Hutch asked reasonably.

Nick sighed, "If I haven't convinced you yet, just say it's because one of us is more stubborn than sensible."

"Are there surveillance cameras in here?" I asked, looking around.

"Why?"

"I just thought there'd be a guard or somethin' keepin' an eye out for unwelcome visitors."

"It's kind of hard to sneak up on a vampire, Starsky, although not impossible. As it is, there is a camera. Up there." Knight pointed to the globe shining above our heads.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Nick nodded, leading the way into the entrance hall.

It was a little disappointing. There were a few clusters of people here and there. I had thought Hutch and me might stand out with our suits.

No way.

Sedate and sinister-looking vampires were few and far between. It's hard to be sinister in neon pink and yellow paisley. All in all, it was easier on the eyeballs to look at the room itself. Dark wood paneling reach toward a high, tiled acoustical ceiling. Hanging on the walls were long banners of rippling silk. A patterned mosaic floor led the eye to the center of the room where a low, round table stood with a large, brass urn of sorts. It was almost three feet high with an intricate pattern engraved in the metal. I couldn't quite make out the design.

"You've been here before," said Hutch, doing his own scan of the place.

"Once," Nick admitted. "About six years ago, I put in my own obligatory appearance when I first got here. I missed Sevier though."

"Sevier?"

"He's the leader here."

"The king of the vampires?" I asked.

"Starsky," my partner reproved.

"Actually that's not too far wrong," the young man said. "He's supposed to be very powerful."

"Like LaCroix?" I asked.

"No."

As short as his answer was, it seemed to fairly shout: "There's no one like LaCroix!"

For the thousandth time, I wondered about Nick's master. We had never met him. I almost wished we had, but couldn't help be relieved that we wouldn't. I didn't say it made any sense.

I went over to the strange vase to examine it. Knight came up behind me.

"Starsky, don't wander off," he said softly. "Not here."

"Hey, I'm a big boy. And they're all pretty far away."

But I had to admit, that might not be far enough.

"The operative word here," Hutch hissed into my ear, "is that you're alive. And you're going to stay that way."

I turned to face him. The intensity in his eyes was nothing new, but there was an undercurrent I had never seen before.

Mesmerizing.

Compelling.

"You won't," the blond went on, his voice echoing in my ears, "be wandering off any more. Not without me."

Of course not. How could I consider even...?

Then there was a hand on my shoulder, Nick's hand. My head cleared and I stared at my partner, frowning.

"...Watch it, partner," I muttered finally.

"What?" he asked, not understanding.

Hutch didn't realize what had happened.

"Your horns are showing," I said, turning back to the vase.

I could almost feel Hutch looking at Nick askance.

"Later," the young man said. He went on, louder, "It's an updated, jazzified version of an Aztec sacrificial urn."

"You mean like hearts and blood and stuff," I said, tracing the engravings with my finger.

"Right. The People have an interest in such things. It's a conversation piece."

"Some conversation."

I took a more detailed surveillance of the people around us. Maybe a few more men than women. Some of them were striking. Some of them not.

Why I should expect vampires to be angular and handsome, I don't know. Too many movies, I guess. But these were all types, builds, races. The only thing they had in common was that they all

seemed reasonably young...looking. This immortality business tends to mess up your age reference.

"They aren't exactly overwhelming with warmth, are they?" I said.

"They" were talking among themselves, watching us.

"Did you expect them to be?" Nick asked.

"Well, new kids on the block and all that. I thought they might want to find out more about us, or somethin'."

Knight's reply was overridden by Hutch.

"What is that sound?" my partner asked, frowning in the direction of what I had assumed were speakers for the nondescript music that lurked in the background.

"Huh?" There's nothing like a good command of the language, I always say.

Knight nodded, "It can be irritating."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I couldn't hear a thing.

"It's a frequency blocker of sorts. I'm not sure how it works. But you can't hear anyone speaking beyond five feet or so. Can you?"

Hutch listened.

"No," he said surprised.

"I guess even vampires want some privacy now and then, huh?" I said.

"You got it. ...Come on. We don't have to spend the whole time out here."

We moved toward one of the inner doors. As we did, we passed fairly close to one of the clusters of beings that were watching us. It was close enough for me to hear their voices, but not to make out the words.

I looked at Hutch who was near enough to touch.

"What...?" I began in a whisper.

But my partner only shook his head with a snap.

"Later," he silently mouthed.

"They're saying," Nick explained, "'LaCroix's whelp', among other things."

"What?" I asked, stopping inside the room to face him.

"Me," he said, simply. "There's a few 'ungrateful bastards' and other variations. But you get the idea."

"You're not exactly among friends," I said.

"No."

"Because of what happened to LaCroix?" Hutch asked.

"...Partly. But it wasn't much different before that. I'm afraid your sponsor is not a shining pinnacle of vampiredom," he said, with a sad smile.

"Who else would've taken us on?" my partner muttered.

Knight shrugged. He pointed toward some paintings on the paneled wall. They were all portraits arranged in an inverted V.

"Anyone I should know?" Hutch asked.

"Very possibly. But I don't know them either, so I can't help you. I think they may be past leaders of the...Community. The one at the top is evidently Sevier. See the plaque in the frame?"

I could see the little brass plate, but I sure couldn't read it.

"Morgan de Sevier," Hutch nodded.

It must be nice.

I studied the uppermost face. The man had a tapered jaw and long, dark hair to his shoulders.

"He looks so young," said my partner, "...in comparison to the others."

That was certainly true. Not so much by way of wrinkles and jowls, which were non-existent in any of the paintings. But the expressions were so different. The others were harsh and perhaps a little tired...of everything. Sevier looked to be very much interested in what life had to offer.

"He's only about two hundred or so — that would make him around forty years older than I am," said Nick. "It's unusual for anyone that newly immortal to become leader."

"Do you think he's here?" my partner asked.

"I'd say so," Nick answered him.

"Why?" I asked. "Can you feel him or somethin'?"

"No. But there's a lot of people around. It was almost deserted when I was here before."

"Power attracts," Hutch mumbled.

"Pretty much. Do you want to try another room? We'll give it another half hour. And then go home."

"Why not?" I said, leading the way to a side door. "There's bound to be somethin' more interestin' than pictures of people I don't know."

I stopped when I realized that, unlike the other room, this one was far from empty. There was a couple engaged in intimate activity on a padded couch.

"Starsky," Nick said into my ear, "you're not supposed to enter a room here alone. Remember?"

"You were right behind me," I protested, not quite removing my attention from the scene in the corner.

"Next time," Hutch said, stepping in front of me and cutting off my line of vision, "make sure one of us in front of you."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, turning away from those glittering eyes.

As I looked around, I found out what had given the lovers their inspiration. Paintings, large and small, engravings, and even cartoons almost covered the walls. Everything depicted the oldest recreation known to man, or woman.

Hutch cleared his throat.

"Well," said Nick easily, "they've done some remodeling since I was here. Do you want to stay or move on?"

But my partner was already heading toward the next door.

"Starsky?" Knight prodded.

"Just a minute," I teased softly. "I might pick up a few pointers."

Knight smiled, as he steered me into the adjoining room.

The first thing I saw was Hutch staring up at one of the largest chandeliers I had ever seen. The light was almost blinding as it reflected off the cut crystalline tears. I was only vaguely aware of others in the room, sitting in chairs and what-all. But then I felt Nick's presence move away from us. I rotated on my heel to find out what was happening.

Our not-so-young man seemed riveted by yet another painting, a large one, maybe two and half feet by four. It was the only one in the room. The subject was a full length portrait of a man with a cape...and nothing else. The only way it escaped an x-rating was by way of some strategic shadows.

"Who is he?" I asked.

Nick pulled his attention from the sculptured face high over our heads — it was really striking, with its broad cheekbones and straight dark hair pulled back.

"It's LaCroix," he whispered.

"LaCroix?"

"You mean he posed for that?" Hutch sputtered.

Have I mentioned my partner's WASP mentality? Now's a good time.

"No," Nick said. "He didn't pose for this one."

"There are oth...?" Hutch began.

"I should have known I would find you here," came a new voice.

We swung around to face a woman dressed in silver. Slender, with an angular face, and bitter, glacial eyes, I suppose she must have been beautiful, especially if she smiled. But there was no smile now, despite the showing of teeth. Her look was more like Madame Lafarge surveying the next victim for the guillotine.

"And from the porn room, too," she continued. "You must have felt right at home."

"I doubt that it was set up just for me," Nick said easily.

Who was she?

"He altered the painting, you know," the woman said, looking up at the portrait.

"So, I see," Knight replied.

"He actually ripped up the canvas," she went on. "And then he went back and mended it."

"You might say he restored it. This is the way the painting was originally."

"He hated you."

She seemed to get a lot of pleasure saying that. In the meantime, Hutch and me were being ignored.

"He was angry with me," the young man countered.

"He was angry," she conceded, "until you stopped him, until you killed him."

Nick seemed under control. But I was picking up some distant sadness.

"That's common knowledge, Jeanette."

Jeanette? *The* Jeanette? Nick's first fledgling, or whatever it was?

"And now you bring your own sodomites here?"

"Now, wait just a minute," I flared.

"Be still, Starsky," I heard someone whisper.

Who? Nick or Hutch?

"They're friends," our senior vampire corrected calmly. "Detectives Hutchinson and Starsky, this is Jeanette."

"Hello," my partner said with icy courtesy.

I decided to follow suit.

"They *are* rather pretty," Jeanette cooed, "...for cops. You're bringing down the neighborhood, Jean-Pierre."

Jean-Pierre?

"I didn't start it," Nick replied. "That was Miranda."

"Ah, yes, Miranda," she sneered. "But she certainly didn't intend to make them of the People."

"No, she intended to destroy them. I only stopped her."

"By killing her," Jeanette crooned, "like you did LaCroix. So much blood on your hands, Jean-Pierre. Do you enjoy the color?"

Knight said nothing.

The woman turned toward Hutch. My partner frowned ever so slightly.

"So blond," she murmured. "Is it real?"

I could see any number of replies occur to him. But he opted for something akin to civility.

"...Very."

"Good. I shall enjoy your stripping for me."

What?!

"No, ma'am," Hutch said calmly. "I don't think so."

She whirled on Nick.

"Why not?" she demanded. "You did as much for Lorraine."

"No," the young man said softly. "I did not."

"You told me..."

"I told you," Nick cut in, "she asked. But I didn't comply."

"Because of LaCroix?"

"Yes."

Come on, Nick. Talk to the woman, will you? Talk so I can figure out what is going on here.

"But why?" she persisted.

"Because LaCroix gave me a choice."

"So, why shouldn't Blondie give us a look?" Jeanette asked sharply, still talking to Knight.

"Why don't you ask him?" I blurted out.

"Starsk," came a reproving hiss. That was Hutch. No one hisses like the Blintz.

"It's his choice," Nick said easily. "Their choice."

Now her attention shifted to me. I think I was better off being ignored.

"And why bring along this one?" She almost leered. "For a midnight snack?"

A long-nailed hand reached for my hair. I stood my ground with effort.

What is this fascination straight-haired people have for curls? There have been times when I'd just as soon shave my head to get rid of them. But even Hutch at times seems intrigued by my knurly

noggin.

"Leave him alone, Jeanette," our friend said.

"Why? What will you do?" she asked coyly.

She was playing to an audience. I looked to find ourselves surrounded by a crowd of unfriendlies. They were looking at Nick, not at her, for all her theatrics. Jeanette didn't appear to notice.

"Will you kill me?" she asked sweetly. "The way you did Miranda? And LaCroix?"

Nick glanced about. But he didn't appear that worried about the others at all.

Hopefully, he knew something I didn't — we didn't. Hutch was no more at ease than me.

"...Will I have to?" Knight asked.

"Do you think you can?" she challenged.

"I hope not to find out."

"You've killed everyone who ever cared about you. That only leaves me, doesn't it?"

What was this woman's problem, anyway? She was fast eroding whatever ease I had felt in this place.

But our friend seemed less than surprised by her viciousness. He didn't quite take her in stride, mind you. It was more like a sad acceptance.

The crowd waited.

For what?

"Well, come on," Jeanette said. "I might as well take you to Morgan."

"Morgan?" Nick sounded surprised.

"Of course, 'Morgan'. Did you expect 'His serene highness, Sevier'?" She thought about it. "Actually, he might like that. But even so, I would never call him that. We are very close."

Knight was silent.

"Or did you think," she purred, "that I'd be wasting away for you? Come along."

Nick waited until she had turned and was five feet beyond before he whispered, "No, not that." He looked over at us. "Sorry," he murmured softly, as the others milled around us.

We were being herded out of the room and into the main hall again.

"Don't be," Hutch shrugged.

We were filtered through some more doors. These were a double set under a banistered loft. This room was bigger than any of the other two put together. There were drapes and tapestries, and no furniture, at least none that I could see.

But lots of people were all around, people who had entered the room with us, people who were already in the room. And more and more of them were looking at us.

I felt Hutch, and then Nick, move closer on either side of me. It gave the term "flying wedge" new meaning. I grinned at the thought.

Slowly, the crowd thinned, or at least opened a wide path to the right of us. I started to move, but was held in place by a light touch on my arm.

"Wait," came Nick's whispered voice.

I glanced at my partner to find him watching me.

"You okay?" his look asked.

I beamed with self-confidence. It probably didn't fool him a bit. But then, he wasn't the one I was trying to convince.

A glint of silver, and I located Jeanette again. She was at the far end of the room, standing on a short set of steps. She leaned close to a man sitting in the only chair in the room.

He wore a white shirt and a dark red cummerbund over dark slacks, along with a black satin cape. It was a simple get-up, especially when compared to some of the others. But with the distinctive long, dark hair and triangular face, it had to be Sevier.

This was the King of the Vampires?

Nick whispered again, "Wait."

For what?

Jeanette was gloating. Everyone else was watching us, including Sevier. A man, standing at his other side, moved back after a parting word. And still we waited. Voices around us swelled and waned.

But there was nothing I could quite make out.

Finally, Morgan lifted a hand and waved us forward. I was more than ready. I nearly stepped on Nick, except for Hutch's restraining hand. A look at my partner revealed not exactly worry or even fear.

Good. I like that.

It was more like a watchful awareness than anything. We weren't looking for trouble, but we weren't going to be surprised if we found it. It put us somewhere beyond "stranger in a strange land," and right on the edge of Daniel and his den, with us walking right up to the head lion.

That I could live without.

"Welcome, Jean-Pierre de Beauchamps," Sevier greeted.

Up close I could see a gold circlet on his head. It was mostly hidden by his hair, except where it crossed his forehead.

King of the Vampires, for real.

"I have heard much about you," the king went on.

"...And I you," Nick replied quietly.

"Then we will both have to be selective about what we believe."

"...Sir, may I present," Knight said, turning toward us, "Kenneth Hutchinson and David Starsky." Our first names this time, not our ranks. Why?

"Gentlemen," Sevier nodded.

We nodded in turn.

"Go ahead," Nick told Hutch.

Go where?

But the question was answered when the crowned man pointed to a place at his feet.

Hutchinson looked over at our friend.

"It's all right," Knight said. "Kneel."

What?

Reluctantly, Hutch did it. Morgan smiled as he reached forward to touch my partner's throat with his left hand. Hutch stiffened.

Nick stepped up to put his hand on Hutch's shoulder. I moved to my partner's other side. The king took us both in and then went back to his...whatever he was doing.

"It is strange," he said. "There are very few blonds among us..."

"Except for those out of a bottle," Jeanette quipped.

Sevier looked at her. While she didn't exactly stammer an apology, she did shut up. And then she went back to glaring at Nick.

"...I don't know why that should be," Morgan went on. "It's not as if we're all genetically linked."

He closed his eyes, still feeling of my partner's jugular vein.

"...She did that to you?" Sevier asked finally.

She?

Miranda, the vampire who had first attacked Hutch. I still didn't know all the details about that initial, almost-fatal bloodletting. We both had been too busy dealing with the new lifestyle she had pushed us into.

Had Morgan somehow read Hutch's history in that strange touch?

He withdrew his hand.

My partner got to his feet.

"You're very strong," said the seated man, somehow impressed and impressive all at the same time. "And very fortunate," he added, indicating Nick with a nod.

"Yes," Hutch agreed.

Sevier studied him a moment more. Then he nodded again. Only then did Nick step away.

"And this one?"

I turned back to Morgan to find him surveying me. That's when I noticed that he had green eyes. Somewhere in the back of my head, I remembered that the historical Dracula was supposed to have had green eyes. Such a cheery thought. Such a consolation.

Starsky, shut up.

Sevier inclined his head toward the place that Hutch had just vacated.

"But I'm not..." I protested.

"He knows what you are, Starsky," Knight said softly. "Just do it."

Not really enthused, I knelt. Nick's hand came down on my left shoulder even before the vampire king touched me. It seemed to surprise the other.

"You're protective," Morgan said to Nick.

I felt our friend shrug. "It's what I know."

Sevier turned his attention back to me. But he just brushed at my Adam's apple.

"Only once?" he asked.

Why? Did it seem that it should have been more?

"They're partners," Nick said.

The king settled back in his thronelike chair.

I scrambled up and backed away until I felt Hutch behind me. So much for dignity.

"An interesting concept, friendship," Morgan said.

"These two are unique," Knight said, "by anyone's standards."

"So it would seem. ...It has been a long time since I've been part of a Presentation," the king said conversationally. And then he seemed to be waiting.

A scan around us revealed everyone looking on with anticipation.

I didn't bother with Jeanette. I knew she wanted one certain head. I didn't really want to see if she wanted a threesome.

But Nick seemed almost puzzled, not by the crowd, but by Morgan himself.

"...Even immortals don't seem to want to take the time to follow the old ways any more," Sevier went on. "But I enjoy a taste of tradition, now and then."

Our friend shook his head slowly, "...Forgive me, ...But do I know you?"

Green eyes smiled.

Nick frowned. "I keep thinking that I've seen you some... You were with Lorraine!"

Jeanette spoke up, "How could you not remember him?"

The two men paid her no notice.

"I was wondering if you had noticed me," Morgan said easily.

"There were a lot of things to notice that night."

"One's own Presentation does tend to be memorable," the king nodded. "Don't you agree, Jeanette?"

The woman shrugged, "You weren't at mine."

"...I don't," Nick began, "remember ever seeing you again."

"Because you didn't. We never spoke. We were never even introduced. But I heard about you.

You and LaCroix. Always in conjunction with LaCroix."

"His only claim to fame." Jeanette again.

Who else? If they could ignore her, so could I. Well, I tried.

"I had heard that most of Lorraine's people died in the fire," Nick said.

What fire?

"Most of them did," Morgan agreed. "I wasn't there at the time. I came back to the news that she was dead, and that LaCroix's killing spree had decimated half the poor mortals in Paris."

"Grief," was all our friend said.

"I can well understand. I was seriously tempted to go on a rampage of my own, when I heard."

"She was a special lady."

"To many," Sevier agreed.

Jeanette cleared her throat.

"Do you have something to say, my dear?" Morgan asked her.

"Nothing I haven't said before," she answered.

Jeanette didn't like Lorraine, obviously. Why? Jealousy, maybe? But why waste your energy, immortal or not, on someone who was dead? Perhaps Jeanette was one of those who guarded their hates

as zealously as they did their loves.

I just hoped our paths wouldn't cross too often with hers. I doubted many had survived it.

Morgan said something to her that I didn't catch. Jeanette didn't look too terribly abashed, mind you. But at least, she was quiet.

Be thankful for small favors.

"They say LaCroix killed more than a hundred mortals in those four days," the king said.

"...There was a lot of blood," Nick sighed.

"And that only you could get near him, only you were able to stop him."

"I stopped him because he was ready to be stopped."

"But you were the only one who was able to talk to him," Morgan countered. "There were a few others that didn't fare as well."

"There was no talking to him. I just hung on."

"And still you lived. I knew two of the People that he killed."

"I was lucky."

A loud voice came out of the crowd, "Too bad LaCroix wasn't as lucky."

I tried to locate the big mouth, but they all seemed to be muttering among themselves.

What kind of man had LaCroix been to have killed a hundred innocent people, even out of grief? Yet Nick had considered him a friend. And Nick had killed that same friend.

Morgan held up his hand for silence. It didn't become deathly quiet, but we could hear him easily now.

"...My friends," the king began, "are...concerned...that you might want to take over here."

"Take over?" Knight questioned. "No. I've never been social. And Jeanette can tell you I'm no leader."

She laughed.

"Yes, Jeanette has told us many tales about you," the king commented.

I'll just bet.

"The only reason I'm here," Nick tried to explain, "is to show Miranda's friends that Hutchinson is fully functional now. They are both able to defend themselves. And I wanted to show the two of them this place. The People are part of their history now."

"*Their* history?" Sevier asked. "Both of them?"

"Oh, yes. You can't affect one without affecting the other. I, too, am interested in friendship," Nick continued.

"Like the one you had," Morgan said.

"The one you destroyed," Jeanette put in.

"...Yes, to both."

I had to admire Nick's discipline. I wasn't sure what I would have done with Jeanette myself, much less what good it would have done. But the urge to wipe that smirk off her face was overwhelming. Whatever I did would have turned a spitting wild cat into a fighting one.

That was something I could live without. And probably a lot longer, too.

"We still have a problem," Sevier was saying.

"What problem?" Knight insisted. "After we leave here, I have no intention of ever coming back."

"That would be a shame."

"Why?"

"You shouldn't cut yourself off from your own people."

"My own people are ready to chop me up and sell me for firewood, thank you."

"Not necessarily."

Nick took a deliberate look around us. We did the same.

It was not a fan club. While quite a few looked indifferent to the whole proceedings, there were more than enough ready to cause trouble.

Our friend looked back at Morgan and seemed to say, "You've got to be kidding."

The vampire king shrugged. "Regardless, they are part of your history, as well."

"And we've done just as well ignoring each other," Nick countered.

"Have you?" The tone was innocent. The expression of those green eyes was not.

The historic Dracula had been one mean something or other. He had done things that Bela Lugosi and Bram Stoker never dreamed of. This man couldn't be him. But that didn't make him any less threatening.

Hutch and me moved, one of us to either side of our friend. Sevier took it in.

"Your honor guard?" he asked.

Knight was silent.

My partner took it up. "Does he need one?"

Morgan studied us both. Then he nodded. With approval?

"That depends on him," he said.

"...What do you want?" Nick asked.

"I suppose we could fight a duel," Sevier said off-handedly. "But that seems a little extreme. And painful."

And dangerous. Don't forget that.

"Then what?"

"...How about what you didn't give to Lorraine?"

"And that was?"

"Submission."

What?!

There were sniggers from the crowd. Jeanette looked like a lion anticipating some Christian munchies.

"...I wasn't aware she required it," Nick said evenly.

"Not usually," Morgan admitted. "Only on special occasions. This is one. To prove that you're no threat."

Prove it to who, I wondered. This king didn't seem that worried about Nick. Curious, yes. But not concerned that he was endangered by him. It was the people around him that were out for blood.

Why? And why would he humor them? Nick hadn't been here for six years. What kind of threat could he be? Or was he a threat at all? Was he just a spectacle to keep the mob happy?

"What about them?" Nick asked.

Them who?

A glance at Hutch gave me the answer.

Us. My partner and me.

A good question.

"They will have safe-escort."

Gee, thanks.

"...And if I refuse to submit?" Knight asked.

"Then you will probably have to fight your way out of here."

"In other words, I either stay with you, or go through you."

"Not through me," Morgan said calmly.

Nick looked around at the avid faces surrounding us, then back to Sevier.

"Is that supposed to be a comfort?" he asked.

"I wouldn't consider it much of one."

I wouldn't consider it one at all.

Our leader studied their leader.

"...I don't think I want you as an enemy," Nick said softly.

"...Nor I, you," the other agreed.

Knight sighed, "Give them their safe-escort now, and I'll stay."

I vaguely registered sounds of protest from the gallery.

"No," I said, without thinking.

Green, blue and brown eyes all centered on me. Everyone except Hutch.

"We're not going anywhere without him," my partner explained.

Nick faced us.

"...Has it occurred to you," he asked, "that I might not want you to see me humiliated?"  
Humiliated? Just what was going to happen here?

"Tough," Hutch said harshly.

The young man opened his mouth to argue the point.

"We won't look," I offered.

Then Nick hardened his jaw as he glared at us. He nodded.

"Your choice," he said.

We couldn't leave him here. Not like this. And not alone.

Nick shifted his attention back to the vampire king.

"My entourage," he smiled.

Sevier smiled in turn. "You've chosen well."

"Yes."

I fought the urge to straighten a little.

"...Now what?" Nick asked.

Suggestions came from the audience. Most of them I couldn't quite decipher. But there were a few offers of "whips" and "stakes" (the wooden kind I assumed, rather than the meat, except there was a comment about being medium rare), and something about a "skewer". Just how much Morgan was listening was hard to say. I watched him study Nick.

"Unbutton your shirt," the king said.

What? Was humiliation all too accurate a description of what was coming?

Our friend began to comply. Then Jeanette stepped in front of him.

"Let me," she said.

Nick hesitated.

I would hope so.

But then his hands fell away and the woman began to work the buttons.

"After all, I have had plenty of practice," she smiled.

They had been lovers once. What had turned that love into...whatever this was? Not really hate.

More like...anger.

Why?

She finished with the shirt and vest and began pulling on his belt. That's when Nick took hold of her wrist.

"No," he said, quietly.

Good. I wasn't ready for an anatomy lesson, not in this company.

Hutch looked as if his jaw was turning to granite.

"But why?" Jeanette protested. "You would have done it for *her*."

Lorraine, I identified.

"No," he repeated.

"Is it because I'm not Lorraine?" she asked. "Or because he..." She looked at Morgan. "...isn't LaCroix?"

"Both. ...But mostly because I'm not who I was."

"That's too bad," she smiled, pushing shirt and vest down his back. "You could be very good."

She ran her hands over his shoulders and chest.

"Jeanette." It was Morgan this time, motioning her back.

The woman obeyed, but not before taking Nick's vest and twirling it like a trophy amid catcalls and laughter.

The vampire king stepped down from his throne. "*Ecce homo*, my friends," he said. "Behold the man."

Silence.

Silence and waiting.

I was getting kind of expectant myself. Hutch seemed at ease. That was deceptive. As always, I found it reassuring to know he was close by. We were strongest together. And we were together with Nick.

"Do you swear allegiance to me, then?" Morgan asked.

"I swear to never do anything to harm your reign here."

Sounded pretty good to me. Even the king seemed to be in accord. But... The "but" in this case turned out to be the man who had been talking to Sevier when we first saw him.

"It's not enough," that other said, stepping forward.

"What is?" It was my voice. I was surprised as anyone by it. I got lots of glares in my direction. Most notable were those not from Nick, or Hutch, who didn't even look at me. I have a talent for saying what my partner's thinking. Whether or not it should be said is something else.

"A valid question," said Morgan. "Zachari?"

"He must swear total allegiance, total support," said the aide.

Slowly, Nick shook his head. "I can't do that."

The king seemed to agree.

"Alternatives," he called out to his court.

"Kill him," Zachari said simply.

Other yells were louder, more insistent.

"We want blood!"

"Make him bleed!"

"Break him!"

Sevier held up his hand for silence and got it. The man had power and knew how to use it.

"Jeanette?" the king asked softly.

"...Whatever you will," she said.

Sadly? Maybe she was.... But there was no time to even finish the thought.

"And what do you say?" Morgan asked Nick.

Our friend shrugged, "I'd rather you just let us go. But you can't do that."

The vampire king looked around the room. The makings of a mob swirled about us.

"Yes," Sevier said, as he turned away and stepped up to his throne.

Sitting, he motioned the bare-chested man forward.

After a moment's hesitation, Nick moved, and then to everyone's surprise, knelt in front of the other man.

What was he doing?

Morgan seemed as startled as the rest of us. He studied Knight. Then he raised his right hand toward Nick's throat. For the first time I noticed that the last two fingers of that hand had longer nails than the rest. Nothing that qualified as talons, mind you. But still, they looked very sharp. Sevier touched the tip of his ring finger just under the line of Knight's jaw.

When I saw that first drop of blood, I surged forward without thinking. I made a grab for the king's arm. But Morgan was much quicker, as he eluded my hand. I found myself staring into a face that held no trace of mercy.

"I admire courage, mortal," the king whispered harshly. "But keep your place."

I was dimly aware of my legs giving way beneath me. Then suddenly Hutch was there, standing between me and green-eyed death. I leaned on his familiar strength. Less than a heartbeat later, Nick was surrounding us both in a bare-armed embrace.

"No," Knight breathed. "No."

Whether that was for us or for Morgan, I don't know. But then he turned to face the king.

"Let me take care of it," our friend said.

Sevier lowered his eyes and leaned back.

"Listen to me," Nick said, flickering his fingers in front of my face, drawing my attention back to our friend. "Listen to me," he repeated, softly. "Sevier has given his word to let you go. Don't force him to negate it."

"What about you?" I asked, almost recovered from my brush with near oblivion.

"It's my risk. I'll..." he paused. "I'm not saying I don't need you. But..."

Then a strange thing happened. Although Nick's lips stopped moving, I could still hear him...inside my head.

***Let me determine when I need you.***

I stared at him.

Telepathy?

***Do you understand?***

My head rattled or nodded, depending on your point of view.

Hutch said, "Yes."

***Don't worry. I trust him. For whatever reason, I trust him,*** Nick reassured us.

Then he went back to his position before Morgan.

Hutch was scowling at the two men in front of us. He had heard as well as I had.

Worry about it later.

The king's hand was moving back to Nick's throat. Our friend gasped, as the sharp nail connected again and continued its way downward.

Why was Nick allowing this?

Blood didn't spurt as might be expected from crossing the jugular like that. But it welled and dripped from the slash that went from jaw to collarbone.

Wounds made by another vampire take a long time to heal, I remembered. Even now, you could still tell where Miranda had clawed him more than a week ago. They were distinct scars, showing puckered white on already pale skin.

Red life trickled down to Nick's chest. Neither man made any attempt to stop the sluggish flow. But Knight's eyes were drooping.

"And what do you swear now?" Sevier asked softly.

"...The same," came the quiet answer.

The vampire king nodded, "...It's enough."

Morgan stood. In one motion he whipped off his cape and swirled it around our wounded friend. I shut out the sounds of the crowd around us, as I stepped forward to help Nick to his feet. The vampire king nodded in silent assent. Knight turned to face the others. Hutch and me stood close.

"It is enough," Morgan repeated. "I am content..." Then he spoke softly to Hutch, "Take him to the room to my left."

We moved in to carry Nick if need be.

"I can walk," Knight said clearly.

With careful precision, our friend pivoted, and then stepped to the indicated door. There was too much care in his movements. Hutch and me were close behind. I shut the door behind us with relief. Morgan was still talking with his court.

Nick sat himself on a couch, and lay back with a sigh.

My partner opened up the borrowed cloak to examine the wound. I went on a scrounging detail to see what kind of medicines I could find.

"How bad is it?" Hutch asked his sponsor.

"I've known worse."

"Thanks a lot. Is there anything we can do?"

Nick sighed, "...Give me a few minutes, and then we'll leave."

"You need to get that cleaned up first," I said, holding up a plastic cup of water and a paper towel. "Modern conveniences," I muttered, as I dabbed at the deep cut.

It had stopped bleeding. But the edges of skin gaped wide.

"You should maybe get some stitches?" I offered.

"It'll be all right," Nick said quietly.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" Hutch argued.

"It does that."

"But this one won't be all closed up tomorrow, will it?" my partner persisted.

"No. ...Because of the kind of wound...and who did it, it will take months to heal, stitches or no."

"Would you just...?" Hutch began.

"Come on, Hutch," I cut in. "Stop pickin' on him. He's had a hard day."

"Amen," Nick mumbled.

I put aside my first aid trash.

"Look," the my partner bristled, "I know we couldn't have fought our way out of there, but did you have to...?"

"We're still not out of there," Knight interrupted. "Or here."

"No, you're not."

I turned to see Morgan standing in front of the closed door.

How did he do that?

"Are they going to leave us alone now?" Hutch asked, concerned about more important problems. I suppose someone should have been.

"For a while," said the king. "Perhaps."

Nick got to his feet, pulling up his shirt.

"Are you shy?" Sevier smiled.

"I hate to fly in the nude," Knight said, continuing with his clothes.

Green eyes deliberately took in the rapidly disappearing chest.

"You are hardly nude," he said.

Knight sighed, "It's cold outside."

Cold? In May?

"Oh?" the king said politely. "And would you like some earmuffs as well?"

A small smile threatened to cross Nick's weary features. "...No," he said finally. "Thank you."

Morgan grinned. "...Here," the king said. "Let me look at that." He pointed at Nick's neck.

"I think you've done...," I began, only to be cut off by a frowning Hutch.

It was a quit-while-you're-ahead look that my partner gave me.

He had a point.

As it was, Sevier simply shut me out.

Fine with me.

"It's deeper than I intended," Morgan said.

"Um," was Knight's reply.

"Wait here," the king said, leaving the room by another door.

"Let's get out of here," I suggested.

"We will, Starsky," Nick said, sitting down again.

He had finished buttoning his shirt, not quite to the collar.

"Are you okay?" Hutch asked.

"Yeah. Mostly tired."

I looked at my partner, who nodded, ever so slightly. We didn't believe him. For all the practice Nick must have had through his long life, he wasn't a very good liar.

After a few moments, Morgan returned carrying a white jar. It looked to be like alabaster, with some sort of carvings on it.

"Put your head back," the king ordered, as he sat down beside our friend.

Again Nick waited a moment before complying.

Inside the jar was a gray-brown mass.

"What is it?" I asked, watching closely, with Hutch doing the same over my shoulder.

"A witch's salve," Sevier said, dipping his finger very cautiously.

"A witch?" my partner questioned skeptically.

"If there can be vampires," the king said, applying the goo with care, "why can't there be witches?"

There's bound to be an argument for that. But I couldn't think of one at the time.

Knight pulled back his head slightly and hissed.

"Nick?" I called.

He lifted what I guess was supposed to be a reassuring hand, but said nothing.

"The heat will pass in a moment," Morgan explained.

Heat?

"What's in it?" Hutch asked.

"I don't really know," the king said. "With a smell like that, I'm not sure I want to," he said, holding up the jar to my partner's face.

Hutchinson's lip almost curled, as he turned away.

Good enough for me.

Sevier replaced the lid. "It does work. A mark will remain for a while. But at least the pain will be gone, for the most part."

Our friend nodded, his eyes still closed.

Morgan smiled.

Suddenly Nick opened his eyes and stared at the other.

What had happened?

"...Seems like good stuff to have around," I ventured, still trying to read the king's smug satisfaction and Knight's...amazement?

"What?" Morgan said, as if he had forgotten us. "Oh, yes. It is, at that. Unfortunately, there's seldom an opportunity to use it. When immortals get to making such wounds on each other, they usually have something more lethal in mind."

"Too bad," I said. "That witch coulda made a fortune."

"The witch is long since dead."

"Thank you," Nick said, getting to his feet. "It is better. ...Is there another way out of here?"

Yeah, going out the way we came didn't seem like a good idea.

"You should perhaps rest a few minutes longer," said the king, as he remained seated.

Royal prerogative, I suppose.

"I'd rather rest at home," Nick said.

"As you wish... There," Morgan said, indicating the door through which he had just come. "Second door on the left and then the third on the right. It will take you outside."

"Thank you," Knight repeated. "Good night."

"And to you. Come again. All of you."

It was nice to be included again. I had been feeling incidental.

Hutch spoke for us both, "Thanks, but we'll pass."

Nick nodded in agreement.

"Just remember. We are your people," Sevier pointed out.

"It's hard to forget," Knight said. "Good night. Gentlemen?"

With that, we hustled through the door, down some very dark halls, and then outside. It was good to see the stars again.

"How are you doing?" I asked our friend.

"Like I said, better. Are you ready for your ride, Starsky?"

Torn between getting out of there and concern for Nick's welfare, I opted for discretion and relied on his judgment.

"Let's go."

"What about our cloaks?" Hutch asked.

"We'll have to wing it," our friend shrugged.

It was a quick trip.

Once at my apartment, Nick began to change clothes from the bag he had left there. The man was not shy. Not that he paraded around exactly. He just striped down quickly, and just as quickly put on the familiar tee shirt and jeans.

"It looks better," Hutch said, pointing to Knight's throat.

The wide gash had closed to a thin, fiery-red line running the length of his neck.

"It is. We were lucky, all of us."

"You call that luck?" my partner demanded.

"We're all alive. A traditional Presentation has been known to maim or even kill. Fortunately, Morgan only wanted a show of submission. As it is, if it weren't for that salve of his, I might have had to go into hibernation for a couple of months."

"It was that bad?" I asked.

"Bad enough. I'm not entirely sure I would have made the trip here. Hutch would have had to carry us both," Nick smiled.

"That means we would have all crashed," my partner grimaced.

"No," our friend said, carefully shaking his head. "You're stronger than you realize."

"That stuff helped that much, huh?" I asked.

"It helped. Miranda only caught me a glancing blow. But a vampire wound that deep and that deliberate can fester for decades. Even now the scar will probably last a couple of years."

"So," Hutch began thoughtfully, "He, in effect, marked you, the way I...the way I did Starsky."

"In a way, yes. It bought our lives. It was worth it," Nick smiled.

Hutch and me frowned. It was a pretty high price for someone else to pay for our lives. And better or not, the wound still looked painful. Then I thought of something else.

"What happened back there?" I asked abruptly.

"What did you miss?" Knight asked.

"I mean between you and Morgan. After he put that glop on you."

"That," Nick nodded. "...I'm not sure. I think he was using mind voice on me."

"Mind voice?" my partner asked. "You mean like telepathy?"

"Like what you did with Hutch and me?" I asked.

"Something like that."

"Something like what? You said you couldn't read minds," I challenged him.

"I didn't read your minds. I sent a message."

"I can understand why Hutch heard you." I looked at Hutch for the confirmation I didn't really need.

The blond head nodded.

"But what about me? There's no blood between us."

"But there is blood between the two of you," Nick countered.

"...You mean that every vampire can hear their vampires an' their vampires an' their...?" I listened to myself saying that and it made no sense at all.

"No," our friend said, seeming to understand. "No two vampires are the same. No two immortals have the same abilities. You," he spoke to Hutch, "can hear me probably because of the blood. But because we didn't exchange blood, I will probably never hear you. But that isn't absolute either. LaCroix could hear anyone he made an effort to listen to. He just didn't bother usually."

"If he was that powerful," my partner asked, "what would have happened if he had crossed Sevier?"

"Just be grateful that's a fight you'll never see."

Oh. "But why did I hear you?" I insisted.

"He told you, Starsky," Hutch said, grimly. "It's because of the blood I took from you."

"That could be part of it, yes," Nick cut in. "...Telepathy and mind voice are not quite the same thing. Mind voice is actual words, messages to the mind. It's very rare. Telepathy is the ability to read each other, to understand each other's thinking. Also not very common. With or without blood, your understanding of each other is legendary in the department...and a few other places as well. You could have picked it up that way."

"But...," I began again.

"And I wanted you to hear me," Knight admitted. "You had to be warned."

"Even that isn't a guarantee," said my partner. "You said you never could reach Jeanette."

"No, and believe me, I tried."

"Yeah, but would she have told you if you did?" I asked.

Not the woman I saw tonight.

"Possibly not. I didn't even know I could do it at all until after she left."

"...Why does she hate you?" Hutch asked.

"When I know that, I'll tell you," Nick said sadly. "...But then again, maybe I won't."

I had long since discarded my jacket. My partner was pacing behind the couch still fully dressed. This lower metabolism could be a real advantage.

No sweat rings.

"What did he say to you?" Hutch asked suddenly. "Morgan, I mean."

"I'm not sure. It wasn't that clear. That's what it felt like, but I haven't heard mind voice in a very long time."

"...Since LaCroix," I guessed.

"Yes."

"And for two immortals to hear each other that aren't related by blood?"

"Rarer than rare."

I considered. "You liked him, didn't you?" I asked.

Slowly, Nick nodded, "...A dangerous man. But yes. ...Look, I'm going to leave now. I've got some thinking to do."

I'll bet. "You sure you should?" I asked.

"What? Think?" Knight smiled.

I frowned, "I know it's better, but your throat ain't healed just yet. Maybe you should stay here today. You've always been welcome. You know that."

"I know and I thank you. Tell you what, I'll come back by here, before I head home. Okay?"

"We don't want to harangue you," Hutch tried to explain. "You've done too much for us to..."

"I don't mind. It's good to know that someone cares."

"We do," my partner said clearly.

"And I appreciate it."

"So, we got us a mutual gratitude society," I said, "among other things."

Our friend nodded with a smile.

"Oh," Hutch said, "and is there a way to fix up one of those things where we don't hear as far? It puts Starsky at a disadvantage and he can't afford too many."

"Yeah, I'm fallin' behind here," I said.

"There's a place not too far away where you can probably get the parts," Nick said. "I'll see about finding you some schematics."

"Where?" I asked. "Henry's?"

"I don't remember the name. I can show you, if you want."

"Yeah. Hutch, you wanna come?"

"Go ahead. I'll raid the bathroom while you're gone."

"Leave me some hot water," I grinned, remembering his first encounter with the shower, after Nick had brought him across.

It had been less than a restful experience for any of us.

"Very funny," Hutch grumbled.

It was. Now. "Just be careful," I said seriously.

My partner nodded, as he went into the bedroom.

"Do you think me and Hutch will ever be able to do that mind talkin' stuff?" I asked Nick, as we went outside.

"I think so, yes."

"Yeah?" I prompted.

"I think that when the time comes...if it comes...whatever, that the two of you will carry on entire conversations and no one else will hear a word."

We took off. Even wounded, Nick was still a steadier flyer than Hutch. My partner had gotten a lot better in the last week, but the airlines still didn't have anything to worry about just yet.

"There," Knight pointed to a store front with a flickering sign.

I nodded. Henry's it was.

"You think it'll happen again," I said. "Don't cha? That Hutch'll try to do me again."

Instead of answering, he took me even higher. Then he put us on a dark window ledge.

"I think," he said, while I tried very hard not to think about where we were, "that sometime in the not too distant future, that it's going to occur to Hutch that while he is immortal, you are not."

"So?"

"So, I don't think," Nick went on, "the day will ever come that he'll be able to watch you die."

With that, he took me back to my apartment house. My head was spinning with memories of Gunther and the tall blond specter that had haunted my hospital room when I had those three bullets in my chest. My ride practically placed my feet on the ground before I realized we had arrived.

"See you later, Starsky," Knight said, as he left again.

I stared after him a while, even after he had disappeared. Numbly, I went up the stairs to my front door.

Hutch was in the kitchen, rattling about.

Nick was right. My partner had told me as much himself — that he wouldn't face being alone again. And he didn't mean just on the streets.

I was going to be immortal.

That would take a little getting used to. The flying, and the never seeing daylight again, and the blood business...the blood was definitely going to be a problem, I thought with a frown. But then — I was going to be immortal with Hutch.

I launched myself in the direction of the noise.

"Hey, Blintz. Whatcha up to?"

- The End -

*[Author's note: I would like to acknowledge Mary Ann McKinnon's for-what-it's-worth comments in the development of the character, Morgan, and the Presentation scene. I'm not sure I want to thank her for it, because she's always leading me in directions I'm not sure I want to go, while she's sitting up in Michigan merrily twirling her mustachios. ☺ ]*

*[ "PRESENTATION" IS THE FOURTH STORY IN A SERIES OF LINKED TALES CALLED L.A. KNIGHTS. A LISTING OF WHERE OTHER STORIES IN THE SERIES CAN BE FOUND FOLLOWS "ALLIES" IN THIS ISSUE.]*



## *Allies*

*by*

*B.N. Fish*

*[This story follows "Presentation," taking place later that same night.]*

*Someone is here.*

Absently, Morgan tucked in his shirt, not bothering with the buttons, as he went down the hall. The vampire leader had been in bed, alone, when he had first noticed the tickling awareness of a stranger within his walls. He had hastily snatched up slacks and shirt, before beginning his hunt.

*Thieves are notoriously unimpressed when confronted by a naked owner of the house.*

The leader left his lieutenants and other occupants of the studio undisturbed, as he passed by their doors. If they weren't aware of any intruder, he might as well let them sleep. He could always summon them if need be. He was still somewhat surprised that he had sensed anything at all, buried as his rooms were within the building.

Silently, he moved down another set of stairs.

Whoever it might be was on the main floor. There was no sound, either of movement or breathing. It was no mortal, then, desperate or otherwise, that had invaded his home.

*So what is a vampire doing here, so close to dawn? And what do they want in the crystal room?* There was little in there except for some heavy wooden furniture and the large, tiered crystal chandelier which gave the room its name, none of which could be tucked into a back pocket.

Immortals were hardly immune to inclinations of larceny. But there were very few willing to risk stealing from Morgan François de Sevier. At least, not more than once.

Sevier smiled, as he pulled his mental shields about him, and stepped into the doorway.

But it was no thief he found there. It was a young man, clad in jeans and leather jacket, standing with his back to the door.

*LaCroix's whelp.*

The epithet sprung to Morgan's mind, as a strange chill swept over him. He had wanted to talk further with this guest from earlier in the night. He still had many questions concerning Knight, many of which had come up since finally meeting this particular immortal. And there the puzzle was, staring up at the large oil painting of LaCroix.

The vampire leader watched his late-night visitor for a few moments. But 5:34 A.M. was too late for any immortal to come calling.

*Unless he possibly wanted to avoid meeting anyone?*

Knight studied the old painting. He stared at the image of the master he had killed. *What is he thinking?*

Sevier was tired of waiting. Dawn would be here soon.

"Hello?" he called.

Knight didn't turn. But Morgan knew he had been identified immediately.

"Hello," the visitor answered, still without moving.

*What now? "...Would you care for more time alone?"* the leader asked.

"No," the young man said, turning at last. "Thank you."

Morgan saw Knight note his open shirt and disheveled appearance.

"I wasn't expecting company," the vampire leader smiled pleasantly.

He certainly wasn't going to apologize for his attire.

"I didn't intend to be any," said Knight.

Evidently, Morgan wasn't going to get an apology, either.

*Well, these are the public rooms, more or less.*

"I just wanted..." the young man sighed.

The leader waved his hand toward the still blood-red mark on the visitor's neck, and asked, "How's your throat?"

"Pretty good, really," the other man said. "Certainly a lot better than it would have been without your help. Thank you again."

"Since it would have been better yet without me at all, you are more than welcome."

"Unavoidable," the young man shrugged.

Then silence, flat and expectant.

Morgan looked up at the painting, "...A most remarkable man."

"Yes," was the only answer.

*Talk to me.* "Jeanette has always maintained that he was the best of all possible masters," Morgan prodded.

"...Yes."

There was something in his voice. It showed even through the brief reply. What? And for who? Jeanette? Or LaCroix?

Both, Morgan guessed.

"It's late," Nick said. "I need to be going."

"It is very late," the elder agreed. "I would have thought you wouldn't be inclined to take chances with the sunlight, considering your history."

The young man didn't look a bit surprised that Sevier knew of this detail from his past. Those long-ago injuries should have killed any vampire, much less the fledgling Nick had been at the time.

Knight said easily, "I hoped to be gone before it became a problem, before anyone knew that I was here."

"It is my house," Morgan pointed out.

The visitor started to say something, then stopped himself.

"I should have known better," Nick admitted.

Sevier nodded.

"I must go," the visitor said.

"Why not stay here?" the leader said impulsively, reluctant that this strange young man should leave again, so soon.

"Here?"

"There's plenty of room."

"...I doubt Jeanette would approve."

*Is he searching for an excuse? No matter.* "Jeanette has no say in it," Morgan said coolly. "You would be my guest, not hers."

Knight shrugged, "It's still not a good idea. Why go looking for trouble?"

"Does Jeanette frighten you?" Sevier asked, trying to provoke him.

"...Yes."

Morgan pondered this for a moment.

"That's possibly very wise," he admitted.

The visitor looked at him sharply, as if expecting...something.

"Stay. Please," the leader said, without pleading. "I would like to talk to you."

"I would think that Jeanette has told you all there is to know about me."

"Possibly. ...Do I frighten you, perhaps?" Sevier prodded again.

"You'd better believe it!"

Morgan laughed, "Definitely not mentally deficient."

"What?"

"Something that LaCroix said about you, according to Jeanette...or do you have a different version of the tale?"

Knight shook his head. "I'm just surprised she remembered that particular phrase."

"She seems to have a remarkable memory."

"...Yes."

Silence again.

"...Would you like to have the painting?" Morgan asked, trying again. "It is yours, isn't it?"

"It was LaCroix's."

"So I understand. But in his absence, I'm willing to return it to the artist, who obviously did it with a loving hand." *What would it be like to have such a friend?* Morgan wondered for the nth time.

"That was long ago," Nick said.

"Time is irrelevant. You did love him, didn't you?"

"I killed him." Bald and defenseless.

"That, too, is irrelevant. You loved him."

The young man sighed, "I loved him."

"Good," Morgan nodded. "A concession on your part. And it would seem that my delaying tactics have been successful. It's light outside."

Knight turned to look.

"You'll have to stay."

"I guess so. ...What is it you want?" Nick Knight asked.

"I'm not sure," Sevier conceded. "Perhaps to find out why Jeanette hates you."

"I can't say. I don't know. ...I need to make some phone calls."

"As you wish. This way," the master vampire directed.

They walked down another hall.

Morgan broke the silence, "I'd also like to know why LaCroix was searching for you."

"...You'd have to ask him," Nick replied.

"I did. When he came here three years ago."

"And what did he say?"

"More or less to mind my own business."

Knight swallowed a smile.

"You may well laugh...now." Sevier shook his head. "A very powerful being, your master."

"Agreed," the young man nodded. "I've never known anyone stronger."

"And yet you killed him."

"Yes. ...But only because he wasn't trying to kill me."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I know it," Knight said deliberately.

*Grief, then. And for LaCroix. But there was something about Jeanette...*

"Where is the phone?"

*Oh, yes. In there,* Morgan pointed.

Nick entered the other room and finding the instrument, began to dial. Sevier listened, unashamed.

"Hello?" came a voice over the line.

Male and mortal, the leader identified.

"Jack?" said Knight. "I'm just checking in."

*Checking in? With a mortal?*

"I'm glad. I was getting worried. Any problems?"

"I'm fine. That's why I called."

"And it's a good thing. Where are you?"  
*Who is this mortal that he can ask such questions?*  
"...I'm at the Studio," Knight said finally.  
"Studio? What studio? ...That studio?!"  
"Careful of the ears, huh?" the young man admonished.  
"Are you out of your mind?"  
*Are you?*  
"Maybe. But don't worry. They are my own kind, after all," Nick said.  
*You don't sound that convinced yourself.*  
"Do you really want to get into that now?" the mortal on the phone asked.  
"...No."  
*Good. Someone else is getting the clipped answers as well.*  
"You sound tired."  
*There seems to be real concern in this "Jack's" voice.*  
"I am. But I should be fine."  
"If you're not, I'll come and get you."  
"No!" came the immediate reply, sharp and definite. "You will not come here alone. Better that you should not come here at all. But never alone."  
"But..." the mortal voice protested.  
"I mean it, Jack. It's suicide, pure and simple."  
"Okay, okay. I'll get Starsky and Hutchinson then. Well, Hutch, anyway."  
"Starsky will be all right," Knight said.  
"Why Starsky and not me?" Jack demanded.  
*So this mortal doesn't know everything.*  
"I'll let them tell you about it. You might check on them later."  
*Well, maybe not.*  
"Done," the mortal said promptly. "You're going to be spending the day there?"  
"Looks like it. I've got to go. Don't worry, Jack."  
*Just how did a vampire acquire a mortal Jewish mother?*  
"I won't make any promises. But be careful."  
"I will."  
Knight hung up. Sevier waited. His visitor had to know he was listening. But Knight seemed unconcerned, as he dialed again.  
"Starsky," came the greeting over the phone.  
*Of course.* This had been the call that Morgan had expected him to make.  
"How are you doing? And how's Hutch?" Knight asked.  
"The Blintz is out like a light and I'm fine. What about you?"  
*Blintz?*  
"I'm at the Studio."  
"Trouble?"  
"Not at the moment. Probably just some word games."  
"With Morgan?"  
"Right."  
*Who else would it be?*  
"You want I should come for you?" Starsky offered.  
"No," Knight said firmly. "...Besides, Hutch needs you more than I do."  
*Does he really?*  
"You sure this is a good idea?"  
"No. But I don't have much choice right now. If there's any trouble, Hutch will know."  
"He will, huh? Does he know that?"  
"Probably not. Tell him it's like fingernails scraping the base of your skull."

"Sounds like a winner," the man on the phone commented.

"It is hard to ignore. Jack will probably come by. Just don't get any ideas about pulling any cavalry routines."

"Are you going to be needing one?"

Morgan listened closely for the reply to that question.

"I shouldn't," Nick said, "I've got to go. Take care of each other."

"Yeah. ...Who takes care of you?"

*Another good question.*

"Jack," came the short answer. "Look, don't worry. I'm just tired, is all. I'll see you tonight."

Nick hung up quickly.

"You have some interesting friends," Morgan said, stepping into view.

"Yes."

*Here we go again.* "Come, let's find some place more private," said the leader.

Knight looked around the empty room.

"But there's no one here," he said.

"That's hardly a guarantee," Sevier smiled.

"I wasn't aware there was such a thing."

"No," the leader replied. "Come into my parlor, said the spider...," Morgan added, with a flourish to the hall.

"I can't come in. I'm already here," Nick said, brushing past the vampire king.

"You are afraid of me."

"I said so, didn't I?"

"I don't sense your fear."

"A credit to my acting."

They walked side by side.

"You are very much like LaCroix in some ways," Morgan said, indicating a winding staircase.

"I was with him a long time."

At the top of the stairs, Morgan gave his guest time to take in the spacious upper floor, bordered on one side by only a waist-high banister. A gleaming bar with bottles and glasses ran the length of another wall. Above that an equally long mirror reflected the two men in the dim, empty room.

"Eighteen years," said the elder.

"What? Oh, with LaCroix."

Nick returned to his observations.

"A phenomenal time to be with one's master," Sevier said.

"He was a phenomenal master."

"True. But doesn't it say something for you as well?"

"Me?"

"Yes. Jeanette didn't stay as long. What was it? Six months?"

"...Something less than that," Knight said quietly.

"I see. This way," Morgan said, indicating a new direction.

As they moved, he noticed the other paying close attention to the complex route they were taking.

The vampire leader was giving the young man something of a tour. Morgan, himself, paid scant attention to the drapes and mirrors, the polished wood and stone.

"It's a study in contrast," Morgan said abruptly.

He smiled to see Nick shake his head as if chiding himself for not following the non-existent conversation.

"What is?" his visitor asked.

"You and Jeanette. Both of you apprenticed at the same time, to the same master. It seems inconsistent." *Inconsistent that LaCroix would have chosen you both, despite what Jeanette says.*

"Variety," came the clipped reply.

"There is a lot to be said for variety. Still... Which of you was first?"

"Didn't Jeanette tell you?"

"Oh, yes. But I've had reason to wonder lately if she..." Morgan paused. "If her memories might have altered with time."

"You think she lied?" Nick's voice showed his surprise.

"No, she wouldn't lie to me."

"She's not stupid."

The vampire leader found himself studying his visitor.

"In any case, she *can't* lie to me," Morgan said, carefully.

The young man nodded, showing his comprehension. To compel the truth from another vampire took a special kind of power. LaCroix could have done it, it was said.

"Has she tried?" Nick asked.

"Not really. White lies are hardly consequential."

"And lies of consequence?"

"As you say, Jeanette isn't stupid. But I have begun to wonder if she hasn't altered her facts a bit."

"Why would she?" Nick asked, as they went through another set of doors.

"Justification," Morgan offered.

The visitor shrugged.

They climbed some more stairs.

"That's not to say that she's been unwilling to talk about LaCroix," the elder vampire went on.

"Why should she be? It's to her credit to have known him."

"And you?"

"What about me? It is for me as well. But for her to know me? I doubt that ever came up."

"But you, too, have a reputation," the king said.

They passed through a complex series of doors and a dark hallway.

"So it seems."

The other seemed to resign himself to not finding his way out again.

*Good.* "Why don't you use it?"

"What's to use? I killed my master. That's hardly commendable and hardly something I can do again, even if I wanted to. As for whatever Jeanette might have told you, I can almost guarantee it's nothing to be proud of."

"You killed a powerful immortal, possibly the most powerful in recent memory. And our memories are long. As for Jeanette, even she can't disguise the fact that it's you that LaCroix came after, it's you that he wanted back."

"I don't believe either one of them said that."

"And what do you think he would have said?" Sevier countered. "He was very anxious to find you again."

"He said that?" Nick asked, looking into the elder's eyes.

Sevier paused a moment, and then replied coolly, "I'm not accustomed to being called a liar...to my face, at least."

"I'm not talking about lies," Knight said impatiently. "I'm asking about his words."

"His exact words were, 'He's mine until I give him up.'"

Nick turned away.

"Jeanette does have a theory as to why you left him," Morgan said. "Her room is there, by the way."

The leader pointed. Nick looked, but seemed to pull back, lest he learn too much.

*She's asleep. Alone?* No.

The sonorous breathing of a mortal could be heard. And yes, Knight had heard it as well.

"Only a theory?" the young man asked briskly. "I'd have thought she'd do better than that."

Morgan led him away in still another direction.

"Oh, she did present it as fact, not supposition. I am curious to hear if your memories agree."

"But why should my memories be any...clearer...than hers? Surely, I have more reason to justify myself than anyone."

"But that is the point. You haven't," Morgan said, going down some stairs this time, "tried to justify yourself, that is."

"What is there to say? I left him and I killed him. Anything else is incidental."

"Even why?"

"Even that."

"To you?" the leader asked, as he pushed aside a panel in a wall to reveal a dim recess.

Knight entered, looking around.

"Except to me," he admitted. "Now."

Morgan joined him and pulled the panel closed. The two men were wrapped in absolute darkness.

"I want to know," Sevier whispered.

Silence.

After a moment, Morgan opened another door, and then another. They stepped into a spacious room of cushioned chairs and a large oval table. This was the sitting room of the vampire leader's personal quarters.

"Shall I tell you Jeanette's theory?" Morgan asked, waving his guest to a chair.

"I doubt I really want to know," Nick answered, not sitting.

"She thinks you left him because of her."

Surprise crossed the young man's face.

"How does that follow?" he asked. "She left us seventeen years before the fact."

"Us?" Morgan questioned.

Knight frowned. "I lived with them...both."

"So you did," the leader smiled. "Perhaps you were just overly patient. Just how long did the three of you live together?"

"...A little under a month."

*Why the hesitation?* Suddenly, Morgan guessed that the young man could probably give the days and hours that Jeanette had been with them. Nick still loved her. So, Jeanette had spoken the truth, even if the circumstances might be a little varied from her account.

"A month," the leader mused. "Please, sit. Would you like something to drink?"

"No. Thank you."

But he did sit.

*It shouldn't feel like a victory, but still...* "The drink doesn't have to be mortal, of course," Sevier said.

"Of course," Nick replied.

"When was the last time you had mortal blood?" Morgan asked, sitting across from his guest.

"Not that long ago. A few days," Nick shrugged.

"From a living source?" the leader asked calmly. *Would Knight lie?*

"...No."

*And why tell the truth?* Could he tell that the vampire leader would know? That Morgan *did* know that Nick had not taken blood from a mortal in a very long time. Possibly even years. "And how long has it been since you made a kill?" Morgan asked, almost carelessly.

"Again, not that long ago."

"Ah, yes, Miranda. By the way, that wasn't her name."

His visitor nodded. "I suspected as much. It doesn't change what happened."

"Yes, the detectives. And why did you choose to interfere with the *lady's* plans for them?"

"I like them."

"Quite an undertaking for a mere 'liking,'" the leader observed.

Nick ignored the possible innuendo. "I had nothing better to do."

*Really?* "Boredom, then. But you're too young to be so bored."

"And what are you? Maybe forty years older? Hardly enough to be so old. What do you want?"

Knight asked again.

*Should I tell him? Why not? "...An ally."*

"An ally? Me?" The young man seemed honestly puzzled.

"You."

"Whatever for? You're leader here. I have no following...and a quite a few enemies."

"But you are also powerful," Sevier stated the obvious.

Nick shook his head and got to his feet.

"I don't know where you got that idea," he said. "I'm alive. That's my only claim to any sort of ability."

"Perhaps. And perhaps the only claim made for you. But through all the tales and trappings a few interesting kernels of possible truth remain."

"Like what?"

"You killed LaCroix."

"That's hardly a recommendation I would want in an ally of mine."

"You were lucky, then?" Morgan asked.

"I was angrier."

"Were you? And still he died. ...You walked in the daylight."

"That was stupidity on my part," Nick said with an edge in his voice. "If it wasn't for LaCroix, and Jeanette, for that matter, I wouldn't have survived it."

"Indeed? ...You drank immortal blood. That's usually fatal to our kind."

"So, I'm an exception. LaCroix saved me there, too."

"You must admit, however, that regardless of his quality of aid, without your spark of life, his assistance would have been redundant."

"You're arguing that it's better to die later than at the time."

"Isn't it?" Morgan questioned. "Without life there is nothing."

"Speaking as one who was there, I can tell you that a certain amount of pain was involved...among other things..."

"Other things?"

But Nick would not be drawn out, "Death was preferable. But LaCroix wouldn't let me die."

"He wouldn't let you? What about your own will to live?"

"My will was often bound up with his. At times..."

Knight closed his mouth.

*Damn. "...You're tired,"* the leader conceded.

"Yes."

"There's a bedroom here," Morgan said, leading the way to one of four doors.

They entered the room with its large, four-poster bedstead and burgundy-draped canopy. But Nick's cursory inspection was interrupted when he spied the large painting on the near wall. Slowly, he approached it.

Morgan smiled.

"Where did you get it?" his visitor asked, as he looked up at a representation of a man and a woman lying together.

"It was given to me." *Not quite a lie.*

Nick frowned. But he said nothing about his doubts.

"It must have been one of his early works," he said instead.

"Do you think so?" Sevier said innocently.

Knight considered this.

"You're right," he admitted. "It's not as if I was with him a major part of his life. But the style..."

"Nor even a major part of your life," Morgan countered. "But you're right. It dates from the mid-1600's."

"LaCroix gave it to Lorraine, didn't he?"

*How do you know that?* "Yes."

"And she gave it to you?" His visitor didn't try to keep the skepticism out of his voice.

"It was bequeathed to me," Morgan explained. "When she died, many of her belongings passed on to me. Among her property was a country house. This painting was in the master bedroom." The vampire leader stepped in close behind Nick. "I lie in here sometimes," he went on softly, "and just stare at it. And I wonder. I wonder what it would be like to have someone like that in my life. Someone to trust completely. Someone to love completely."

"They are few and far between. ...You lay in here? You sleep in here, then? This is your bedroom?"

"I've slept in all these rooms. In fact, I've slept in every room in the building, at one time or another."

"...Security?" Nick asked.

"Yes," Morgan said. "...Tell me, did LaCroix find your intuition as unnerving as I do?"

"It doesn't happen that often," Nick shrugged. "If it did bother him, he never said."

His visitor turned back to the picture. The elder followed his gaze.

The work revealed little of human anatomy except for a long male back and narrow hips. These obscured the female form, with the exception of the slender, enwrapping arms. Faces were hidden in shadows. But the woman's abundant hair flowed over her lover's shoulder.

Lorraine's hair.

"...It's not his most erotic, you know," Nick said, evidently for something to say, as he walked away from the painting and his host.

"If you mean explicit, then I agree. But this one does strike a certain chord, just the same."

"...Yes."

*One word answers again.* The leader almost sighed. "I have seen a few of his more...obvious, shall we say, pieces," Morgan said.

"Have you?"

Two words, but no real interest.

"I've even seen one or two that you posed for," Morgan added.

"I would have thought most of those destroyed, or at the very least, a good distance from here.

"As far as I know, the one painting is still in France. The other is a drawing."

"LaCroix did a lot of drawings," Knight shrugged.

"So I understand. It's also here."

"Here?" Nick questioned. "In Los Angeles?"

"In Jeanette's room."

"What?"

*Aha, not quite so indifferent, after all.* "It's matted and framed and under glass."

But there was no reply this time.

"Did you enjoy posing for it?" Sevier asked.

"You haven't done much modeling, obviously. It's difficult to hold one position for any length of time. And that's *any* position."

"Then you didn't enjoy it."

"I didn't particularly find it arousing if that's what you mean. But it wasn't that much of a hardship either. It was one of the few things he ever asked of me. And we'd talk. That I enjoyed. A lot."

"So Jeanette has said. Evidently, she felt singularly excluded during your conversations."

"That could be," Nick admitted. "I could be singularly one-track minded in those days. I still am."

"Meaning that if your attention was on LaCroix, you didn't notice anyone else?"

"Meaning that he was the center of my world."

"...Yet you did notice when Jeanette left you, didn't you?"

"I noticed. Look, I'm tired."

"Yes, of course. But before I leave, I would like to tell you Jeanette's version of events."

"Why? Surely, you've made up your mind by now."

"Aren't you curious?" Morgan asked.

"I'm trying very hard not to be."

"For my benefit, then. I want you to know." The vampire leader shrugged. "According to Jeanette, you are the older. That while she knew LaCroix before you did, he took you first, out of pity."

Silence.

"Well?" Morgan prodded. "No comment?"

"Why? It could well be true."

"Is that what LaCroix told you?"

"No."

Sevier studied him. "...Jeanette joined you soon after."

Knight said nothing.

"Have I told you," Morgan said, "that you have an annoying habit of not asking the right questions?"

"What should I ask? It's true. She came across about a month after I did."

Morgan glared.

"Very well. Was LaCroix Jeanette's master?" he asked deliberately.

Nick looked into the other's eyes. "...To all intents and purposes, he was."

"But it was your blood, wasn't it?"

His visitor shrugged, "Blood can be a cheap commodity at times."

"Wasn't it?" the leader insisted.

Knight sighed. "I had almost brought her across before I knew what I was doing. LaCroix was her teacher. He taught us both."

"Then she left. And you stayed."

"She learned faster than I did."

Morgan sank back into the lounge chair. He indicated another for Nick. But his visitor kept moving around the room, taking in different details of its furnishings. But always he returned to the huge painting.

"Jeanette says she left because she couldn't stand to watch the two of you together."

The younger man nodded, "So she said, even to me."

"She says that you threw yourself at LaCroix constantly, flaunting yourself."

"Flaunting?" Nick questioned.

*Good. He's interested in spite of himself.*

"That you walked around naked all the time. Not that LaCroix ever complained," Morgan went on.

"He was an artist," Knight sighed wearily. "I often posed for him."

"You stayed with him for his protection and for his money. And when you had everything he had to give, you left...leaving Jeanette to cope with his pain."

The young man considered, "Well, the protection is true enough. I did get myself into some dangerous predicaments. Without him, I wouldn't have survived even my first year. His money? I did spend it, and not always to his liking. But to have left him because he had nothing left to give? No. I could have stayed with him for a millennium and never learned all he knew."

*Indeed?* "Jeanette also says you left because you finally realized that you would never have her."

"What?!"

"So she said," Morgan repeated.

Nick shook his head and turned away.

"What are you thinking?" the vampire leader asked.

"...What I wouldn't give for it to have been that simple."

"Did you regret it? Leaving him?"

"Often."

*One word. But it says much.* "...Why did you leave him?"

The young man went to one of the tapestries hanging on another wall.  
"For a hundred reasons," he said quietly. "All of which mattered, then."

"And now?"

"...They still matter."

*Would you do it again?* Morgan wondered. But he decided not to ask. At least, not now.

"Why are you looking for allies, anyway?" Nick asked. "Are you that worried about your leadership?"

"No. But one can never have too many allies," Sevier said easily.

"Not from what I've heard. Too many allies and no one gets anything done."

"True," the leader admitted. "They can be too busy fighting each other to agree on anything."

"LaCroix used to tell me that immortals weren't socially oriented. I found out some time later that he meant he wasn't. Not that he had reason to be. I've taken on a lot of his attitudes about certain things. I don't know how to deal with court intrigues. What is more to the point, I don't want to learn."

Sevier looked up at Nick from his near-reclining position.

"This from the young man that wanted to learn everything?" he asked, with a smile.

That seemed to startle the other.

*Good. You're too much in control.*

Finally, Nick spoke. "I got over it."

"Have you? ...Have you really?" *I don't believe a word.* Morgan got to his feet and slowly approached the other.

"It doesn't matter," Knight denied. "I can't help you."

"I think you can," the leader said, softly. "I think you can do more than you realize, both for me, and for yourself."

It occurred to Morgan as he came near, that he wasn't quite sure how much he did want from Nick.

"...Again," his visitor insisted, "why an ally?"

"Because if my...reign is not uncertain, it's still not as serene as I could wish, either." "I didn't think anyone who wanted power would be that interested in safety."

"Who said I wanted power? It was forced upon me," Sevier said sharply.

"Tell them no."

"I could wish it were that simple. ...When Lorraine died, it was assumed by some that I would take her place." The leader walked to a dresser with one lone statuette of a nude woman. "When I told them to choose someone else, some of those others decided that I was a threat to their own ambitions. It became a case of lead or die."

"Speaking as an expert," Nick smiled, "there's always running away."

"I tried. But even that didn't work until I crossed the Atlantic. After all, I reasoned, who was going to cross all that water just to get me? And it wasn't as if this hemisphere had a history of nobility."

"Except that this hemisphere was largely settled by people from the Old World."

"There is that," Morgan agreed.

He turned to face his visitor.

"So here you are again," Nick said.

"Yes. But at least this time, I walked into this particular situation, supposedly knowing what I was doing."

"Did you?"

"Not entirely. But you see, my main difficulty is that, unlike you and LaCroix, I enjoy being around people, immortal and mortal alike."

"And now?"

"And now, I find I'm thinking about running again," the leader admitted.

"So do it."

"I can't. I have...certain commitments here." *Commitments I'm not free to discuss. With you.*

*Just yet.*

"Take them with you."

*An answer already considered.* "That is a possibility," Sevier agreed. "But again, it's not that simple."

"Is it ever simple?" Knight asked.

"Possibly not."

"So, you want help with these commitments?"

"No, that's my problem. I'll take care of it."

"Then why me?"

Morgan began to circle the other.

"I want what you can give me," he said softly.

"I have nothing."

"I want what you gave LaCroix," Morgan continued, raising his hand toward Nick's face.

"I killed LaCroix," Nick answered, stepping away.

"It hasn't stopped you from loving him."

"That isn't for sale."

"Neither is your loyalty, or your friendship, I would hope."

Knight shook his head and turned back to the painting. Sevier moved quickly behind him and touched the young man's temple with his finger.

*I want it all,* the vampire leader sent the thought.

"No," Nick winced, as he moved toward the center of the room.

"Then tell me you heard nothing just now," Morgan snapped, exasperated. "That you felt nothing last night." *Deny it.* Deny that strange tingle of mind voice, words without speaking. So rare among our kind, any kind.

"I can't."

Sevier grinned with satisfaction, "Not you didn't. Or even you *won't*. Only you *can't*. Why not? ...Why are you fighting this?"

"Look, I'm tired," Knight shook his head. "You can make almost anything you want out of what I've said."

*True.* But could the leader let him go? If he pushed just a bit harder, Nick could crumble into his arms. Or...Morgan could lose him altogether. "Yes," the elder vampire breathed out. "Then sleep."

Sevier turned on his heel and left the room. Outside, he made an abrupt turn and listened.

Nick seemed surprised by his sudden departure. There was a total lack of sound. Then came a sigh.

"Not too good a showing was it?" came Knight's voice softly.

*Who is he speaking to?* Himself? Or the painting, perhaps?

There was a thud of shoes being dropped. A gentle squeak of a spring as the young man lay back on the bed.

Silently, Morgan went into one of the other rooms. He shed his clothes and dropped into his own bed with more anger than grace.

*Just who is this Nick/Jean-Pierre?* A stranger, known only by rumor and second-hand tales. He wasn't quite the weak parasite that Jeanette had painted. And he wasn't the megalomaniac that others had reported. Sevier had attempted to keep an open mind, considering the tellers of the tales. His own memories of Jean-Pierre were more than hazy, having only really seen him that one time.

But none of it had prepared him for the young man he had met last night, and finally talked to. Power, not leashed, not even worn about him, but there. Part of him, never obvious, but in the essence of his voice and manner.

*Like LaCroix.*

LaCroix's whelp, indeed. Upon meeting this whelp, he could finally understand that powerful immortal's obsession with finding this one fledgling. And Nick seemed to share a similar obsession concerning his master. Together they must have been quite formidable.

Sevier jumped from the bed. Nude and hair streaming behind him, he began to pace.

And when LaCroix had gone on his killing spree after Lorraine died, only this insignificant catamite had been able to get near him with any kind of safety. Except Nick wasn't a catamite. Morgan had heard of them both denying that accusation. It took meeting Nick at last to put that rumor to rest. Sex, while great fun, was hardly the glue to last for centuries. And they had been held, both of them.

"Learning and love," Lorraine had said those many years ago about them. That's what held them. Jean-Pierre learned facts and wisdom from LaCroix. LaCroix relearned his humanity, even if it was only applied in one direction.

"I want him," Morgan said aloud. "Can you hear me, LaCroix? I want what you had with him. ...But how do I reach him? How do I make him give freely what he gave to you?"

There was no answer, of course.

The vampire leader went to the door. He only just noticed his nakedness, when he pulled it open. Reluctantly, he went back for his trousers. He doubted Nick would be offended. Whoever had posed for those pictures couldn't have been prudish. But there was no sense in revealing all his secrets, just yet. So, modesty barely served, he went to and looked inside his guest's bedroom door.

Nick Knight lay fully dressed on the bed. His stocking feet were pressed flat on the mattress, his knees bent upward. He hadn't intended to be comfortable, evidently, or possibly even to sleep at all. But his eyes were closed.

Morgan slipped inside. Although he made no noise, he saw Nick turn toward him, watching. Only vaguely aware of the picture he must be making, nude to the hip and barefoot, the vampire leader moved silently to the bedside. He could feel his eyes glittering.

Nick waited.

Sevier smiled, then leaned forward.

"Don't," the younger man whispered, without moving.

A flash of anger crossed the leader's face, as he straightened. Then he calmed, as he studied the young man, then turned away. But instead of leaving the room, he went to one of the padded chairs. There he arranged himself where he could lay back and watch his guest.

To his surprise, Nick then went to sleep.

\*

The leader woke an hour or so before sunset to find his charge putting on his shoes. Nick glanced over at his apparently sleeping guardian, and smiled.

*Why?* the thought raced through Sevier's mind.

Nick left the room.

Morgan grabbed up a shirt from the closet and followed.

Oddly enough, the young man didn't seem that intent on finding his way out. He wandered down halls and through doorways, apparently exploring more than anything. Eventually Knight did find the front hall. But he did not quickly evacuate. He appeared to linger, waiting.

*For what?* "Were you going to say good-bye?" Sevier asked from above him.

"I don't know," Nick replied, turning.

The elder vampire slowly descended the staircase, confident of his own grace and control.

"I'm surprised that you made your way here," he said.

"So am I."

Morgan came closer. But he made no move to touch the detective again.

"I won't chase you," he said softly.

Nick smiled, "I think that's what worries me. You may not have to."

"...Another concession?"

"To the possibility, yes."

The vampire leader studied him, "...I'm not LaCroix."

"No," came the immediate agreement. "But...you touch me in some of the places he did. ...And possibly in some he never knew."

Morgan nodded, not quite understanding. *Do you understand?*  
"Perhaps," Knight went on, "the difference will keep you alive."  
"Or it may kill you," the vampire leader countered.  
"I can deal with that."  
Knight crossed the room to the vestibule. He pulled open the huge doors. He then pivoted back to find the master vampire behind him.  
Morgan crossed his arms, waiting.  
"*Hasta luego*," said the other.  
"Until when?" Sevier translated.  
"I...don't know. Soon. ...*Adieu*."  
Nick stepped outside into the night air.  
"You would command me to God?" the leader asked, with a smile.  
"Why not? At least until I can talk to you again."  
The young man lifted his arms.  
"Does God often answer your prayers?" Morgan called.  
Nick stopped and looked back at him, "He's been known to say no."  
"How can you...?" Sevier questioned, as he strode outside.  
"Not now," the young man interrupted. "I, too, have commitments, obligations. We'll talk again. And maybe we'll argue the ways of God and...beings."  
He left the ground.  
"Did you and LaCroix have such talks?" Morgan shouted.  
"...Often and long into the night. And we never settled a thing."  
The young man smiled as he hovered in mid-air. The vampire leader smiled in answer.  
"...Take care," Morgan said finally, "...my friend?"  
"And you..." Nick lifted higher into the night sky and sped away. A whisper was left behind to be heard after he was gone. "...I hope."

- The End -

[Editor's Note: "*Allies*" is the fifth story in a series of linked tales called *L.A. Knights*. "*Instinct*" (Starsky and Hutch meet Nick Knight for the first time) and "*Choices*" (Nick brings Hutch across to save him from being bound to a vampire who would take away his free will) appeared in *Good Guys Wear Fangs 1*, while "*Lessons*" (Hutch begins to adjust to the vampire life) appeared in *Good Guys Wear Fangs 2*.

Coming in *Good Guys Wear Fangs 4: More of Starsky and Hutch's education in the realm of the undead, and more Morgan de Sevier and Nick Knight.*

Also of interest: Nick's origins and early adventures with LaCroix and Jeanette — briefly referred to in "*Allies*" — are chronicled in a series of stories by B.N. Fish in various volumes of *Just My Type*, edited by Mysti Frank, available from Mysti at Media West and other conventions. Please note that some stories in *Just My Type* contain same sex situations.]



## LACROIX

by Denysé M. Bridger

*Bleed for me*

*Allow me to drink*

*The passion of you fills my veins*

*And sears the part of me that searched an eternity*

*Claiming the right to possess*

*Simply by being*

*Elixir of life*

*Sticky sweet wine*

*This madness is you breathing in me*

*Consuming the innocence*

*I no longer own*

*My gift to you*

*Touch me*

*Let me love you*

*With you Death is more beguiling than life*

*Nothing is worth dying for?*

*The fools who believe that*

*Have never known you*

*Let me die*

*In your arms*

*With your blood on my lips*

*Let me wake*

*In your arms*

*With your brand on my soul*

*Choose me*

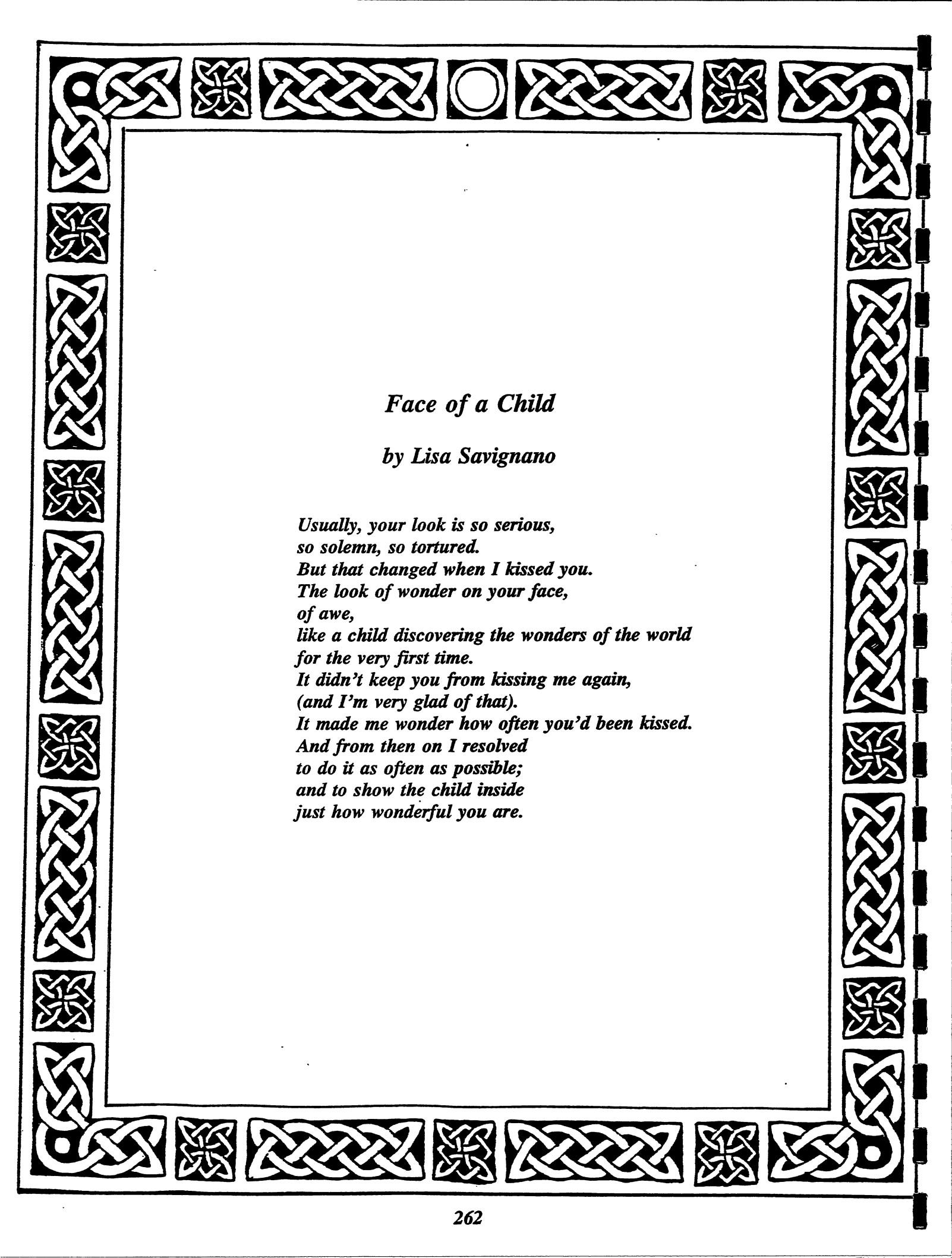
*As consort to the night*

*Let me serve you*

*Give me in death what life denied me*

*A shelter for my troubled heart*

*A place to belong*



## *Face of a Child*

*by Lisa Savignano*

*Usually, your look is so serious,  
so solemn, so tortured.  
But that changed when I kissed you.  
The look of wonder on your face,  
of awe,  
like a child discovering the wonders of the world  
for the very first time.  
It didn't keep you from kissing me again,  
(and I'm very glad of that).  
It made me wonder how often you'd been kissed.  
And from then on I resolved  
to do it as often as possible;  
and to show the child inside  
just how wonderful you are.*

# *Hungry Eyes*

*by*

*Lisa Savignano*

"Your eyes are where the summer lives  
in pools of quiet fire.  
Come mess with my sincerity,  
go down on my desire." —Robert Plant

*[Editor's note: This tale is based upon Nick Knight, rather than the more recent *Forever Knight*. This Nick has a different sort of angst, and his relationships, past and present, have been different from the more recent Nick's. His Schanke is harsher and less sympathetic, he has no Natalie in his life, and there are so many gaps in his past and in the rules of this vampire world that the writer can fill them out in any fashion he or she chooses. Enjoy!]*

The garden was dark and quiet at night. Nobody bothered visiting this part of the campus so late. It was the perfect place to make out.

The scent of roses drifted around them as his mouth traced wet trails down her jaw and across her cheek. His hands, meanwhile, skimmed smoothly across her soft flesh, one up her leg, the other drifting lazily across the warmth of her stomach. He stroked it once and then again, moving down to tickle her through her jeans.

She gasped and clutched at him, the smell of roses mingling with that of passion as she rubbed herself against him, nails digging into his T-shirted back. His mouth moved from her collar-bone to her jaw slowly. His thumbs caressed her chin and tilted her head back.

Time stood still.

He licked her throat once, slowly, completely, tasting her. She moaned low, in her throat, pinned by his body above hers. He lowered his head and she whimpered.

Pain tore through her throat, and she choked on her own blood. Panicking, she grabbed for her neck, but, with contemptuous ease, he captured her wrists and pinned them over her head. Then, he lowered his mouth to her neck, and feasted.

\*

The crime scene was crowded by the time Nick got there. He saw the roped-off body out of the corner of his eye, a young girl, her features contorted in fear. An ugly red smear covered one side of her throat and some blood had dribbled to the ground, forming a sticky pool that was just beginning to dry.

Both hands were locked in a position over her head, kept there by rigor mortis. He looked down at her, touching the cold softness of her cheek. She might have been pretty once, but death had leeched away all her beauty, leaving only the fear behind.

He examined her neck. The wound was a ragged tear, almost a rip. She would not have lived for more than a minute. At least it had been quick. "Messy." The word hissed out between his teeth. La Croix

had killed his best friend like this. A quick bite and then a pull. He had to look away. Even though it had been a century ago, it seemed like yesterday.

"Ah, Knight, you're here." Jimenez, a dark, balding man in his forties, shook his head as he stepped closer. "Damn shame for her to die like that."

"Yeah." Any further words were cut off by the tightness in his throat. "You got an I.D.?"

"Mmn." Jimenez consulted his notepad. "Regina Hill, theater student. Found by her." He indicated a blonde girl talking rather frenziedly to two plainclothes detectives with a jerk of his chin. He looked back down at the dead girl and sighed. "What a shitcan."

"No clues?"

"None," said the older man with a gesture of disgust. "Like it was vacuumed clean. Just a few sneaker prints, but they could belong to anyone." He fixed Nick with his black eyes. "We'll come out of this smelling like a latrine, mark my words." He sniffed and looked back at his notebook. "Why don't you go talk with her roommates? See if they have anything to say. Hiller Hall two-twelve."

Nick nodded, running a hand through his longish, black hair, and wheeled his lanky body in the direction indicated. Jimenez was a good cop, but too depressing to want to remain around for long.

\*

Hiller Hall was a brick building surrounded by pines and roses. The cool air blew over him as he opened the door, but he barely noticed the chill. The halls were quiet, with an undertone of fear and anxiety. The doors were all closed, but he could sense the girls inside were all awake, nervous and frightened. They weren't used to death.

The door to Room 212 was partly open, and the shadows of three girls passed the door every now and again. He knocked, and was greeted by a pair of hostile green eyes. "What do you want?" snarled the girl, her Scottish accent strong and thick, giving his black leather jacket a hard stare.

"Police." He told her, and watched her sag back.

"Let him in, Sheelagh," a quiet voice said. "We don't want to keep him to keep standing there all night."

The girl moved back to let the detective enter, and he came into the small, messy room. Two sets of bunk beds were pushed up against the walls, and two dressers and two closets completed the picture. The walls were hung with posters, mostly of half-nude men in muscle shirts and jeans, and clothing, books, and papers covered all the available flat surfaces in the room.

Three girls looked up at him. The girl who had let him in was small and dark, with short black hair, green eyes and freckled skin. Of the two others, one was blonde, with turquoise eyes. She'd clutched her hands together and was twisting them back and forth. She looked up at him and surprise flooded her face, leaving in its wake a look of crafty hunger.

"DHM," she remarked to the remaining girl, who gave her a fond, though exasperated, look.

"Is that all you can think of?" she asked. "Regina's dead!"

"But I'm not, and I say he's definitely HM." The blonde looked in his direction and licked her lips.

He met the third girl's calm brown eyes as she smiled at him with a bit of whimsy. Her chocolate hair fell to the middle of her back, and her rosy lips parted softly as the corners curled up. He flashed her a grin, and she smiled wider, her eyes crinkling at the corners. Then, her smile died, a flash of sadness bursting over her features. But why was he thinking about her like this? He'd just met her, and she was just another witness.

"I know this is going to be hard for all of you, but I have to ask you some questions. How well did you know Regina?"

Sheelagh looked up then. "She was my bunk mate," she offered, "but she kept to herself mostly. She came and went at odd hours." Her accent thickened. "I just canna' believe she's gone."

The brunette went over and touched the girl compassionately on the shoulder, saying nothing, but Sheelagh flashed her a look of warmth all the same.

"Regina was in the play with us," the blonde offered, crossing her legs, and inching up her

nightgown so she could show off her calves.

"And you are?"

"Mirian — Miri — Hunter." The girl arched her back seductively and lay back slightly. Nick ignored her. He didn't have time for this.

He shifted his eyes to the brunette. "Lysana Nathan," she offered, dropping her eyes.

"Is there somewhere I can talk to each of you privately?"

"Yes," Lysana said, pointing to a door barely visible under a draping of clothes.

"We have a small storeroom. It's not much, but it's better than nothing. All that's in there is some boxes."

The storeroom was of claustrophobic tightness. Sheelagh came in first.

"Your name?" he asked. "Your *full* name."

"Sheelagh Caroline Mundy," she mumbled, and then looked up with a start. "I'm sorry...."

"I know it's hard, but I need some information."

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"Did she say where she was going tonight?"

"No. We were working on the play. She didn't get a part, so she was working on scenery. I mean, we all work on the scenery, the props, scour the side-street markets for jewelry that looks period. We all try to help out. I left early, I had to study my books for a physics exam. She was still there when I went. She was helping Therese, the prop master."

"Did she have a boyfriend?"

"No. She was too busy with the rest of her studies. Most of the men think she's a cold fish. But she's a nice person, once you get to know her." A stricken look crossed her face, and she slumped forward, her face in her hands. "I've been talking about her like she's still here," she managed to get out between sobs.

Nick bent down and laid a hand on her shoulder. This was the worst part about immortality. He could grow used to seeing people die. But this girl...she was so young. Most of the cops he'd worked with had grown pragmatic, but he couldn't. For him, seeing the human side of death grew no easier with the passing years.

"I can talk to you later," he said softly. "Why don't you send in one of your roommates?"

Her trembling lips firmed as she ran fingers over her cheeks to remove any lingering moisture. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I want to get this over with."

"All right." He sensed she was fighting to keep control, but her determination impressed him. "Was she...different these last few weeks? Acting different, acting in ways she usually didn't?"

Sheelagh cocked her head to one side. "No," she said. "I can't think of anything she did differently. She was tired, but that was because she wasn't used to any kind of work. She was very sedentary."

"Isn't that unusual for an actress?"

Sheelagh smiled suddenly. "She was originally studying Library Science. Her decision to be an actress was rather sudden, or so I gathered. Her family didn't approve in the slightest."

"Oh?"

"Her father was in research of some kind. She said he's dead. Her mother was from old money and didn't like her daughter turning to such a *disreputable* profession."

"Did she have any brothers or sisters?"

"No, I think she was an only child."

"Do you know her mother's address?" He knew it was a long shot, but it was better than nothing.

"No. It's somewhere in Boston, I think. Right now, though, she probably in her summer home on Jamaica."

Well, that put an end to that, then. But the woman would have to be notified, if nothing else. "Thank you very much. If you'd send one of the other girls in...?"

She nodded and disappeared around the edge of the door with nary a whisper to mark her passing. A few moments later, the blonde, Miri, walked in. She smiled broadly at him and struck a provocative pose on the edge of a box. "How can I help you?" she asked, her voice seductive.

"How well did you know Miss Hill?" He'd been the object of several lust-struck women before, and knew how to handle them. Professional was the way to go. They usually gave up.

"As well as anyone gets to know a roommate, I guess." she said, leaning back and arching slightly to show off her ample breasts. "Regina was pretty quiet. Always in her books. I prefer to get out and...do things."

*I'll just bet you do*, he thought, but let none of that show in his expression. "Miss Hunter said that Miss Hill stayed late to work on scenery. Where were you tonight?"

"I was practicing being a vampire," she told him brightly. Then, noticing his expression, she added, "I'm one of the brides of Dracula in the play we're having. So's Lysana, and Susie. We had to stay late. Selene, the costume lady, was doing the last fitting on our dresses."

"Did you see Regina, when she left? Or who she left with?"

"I had more important things to worry about," she said archly.

He lifted an eyebrow, but decided she was telling the truth. People like her considered nothing more important than themselves. "Thank you," he finally said. "Send in your other roommate, will you?"

She pouted and moved away. He could almost imagine the flounce in her skirts as she stepped out, if she'd been wearing any.

"You wanted to see me?" Lysana, the third girl, peered around the edge of the door. Slowly, she advanced into the room at his affirmative nod. Her nightgown was of the empire style, a blue silk creation that swished softly as she moved. It set off her pale complexion and dark hair, making her look more beautiful than she really was. She noticed the direction of his gaze and crossed her arms protectively over her breasts, a deep flush breaking over her cheeks.

"You knew Regina well?" he asked.

She nodded. "She and I got along well because we were both quiet." She perched nervously on the edge of a brown box. "She wasn't really suited to being an actress. She did it because she wanted to spite her mother."

"And why are *you* an actress, then?" he asked.

She blushed again, pulling her arms in tighter. "I'm not. I'm a chemistry major, but Miri is my friend and she talked me into trying out. Regina was helping me with my part."

"Did you see where she went tonight?" He leaned in closer, peering into her deep brown eyes, the thudding of her heart like the staccato beat of a drum in his ears.

She shook her head regretfully. "I was helping her paint scenery around seven, but then Selene called me over to do a fitting on my costume, and I did a run-through of my scene, and after that I just lost track of her. I think..." She looked down at her hands. "I think I was the last person to see her alive." She looked at him again, topaz eyes wide and heartrending. "Do you know what that's like? Knowing you might have been responsible..." She covered her face with one palm, and he could see her bite her lip, hard.

"You weren't responsible," he told her.

"You don't know that and I don't know that," she returned. "All I can think is: What could I have done, what could I have said... that would make her still be alive?"

He gently laid a hand on her shoulder. Her heart was beating erratically, and much too fast, but the sensation of the blood surging just under her skin was rapturous, and it took an effort to speak. "You can't blame yourself for this. It wasn't your fault." He looked straight into her eyes as he said it, forcing just enough compulsion on her so she'd believe it.

The effects were immediate. She slumped slightly, the tension gone from her body, and her heartbeat began to slow. "I guess you're right," she said softly. "It's just so horrible. Who'd have believed anything like that would happen to her?" She looked him straight in the eye. "What did happen? All we were told was that she'd been killed."

That surprised him, her wanting to know how her friend died. He hadn't figured her for a ghoulie. But then, she spoke again.

"I mean...did she suffer?" Her voice was low and intense, her eyes beseeching.

He shook his head. "No, it was quick."

She wilted slowly, drew into herself. "I'm glad she didn't suffer," she said, her voice barely above

a whisper. "I couldn't bear the thought of someone...torturing her." A quicksilver tear spilled over onto her cheek and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't want to cry."

"It's all right." he assured her. "You have a right to feel sorry for your friend."

"You must see a lot of crying women," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Quite a few," he agreed, touching her shoulder gently. Startled, she looked up, like a spooked deer. Her deep topaz eyes caught the light and flashed golden, and a thrust of sensation went through him at the sight. Their eyes caught and held for a few breathless moments, and he found himself wondering how she would feel in his arms.

Then, she relaxed, and her eyes dropped. "Just a few more questions," he found himself saying. She nodded without looking at him, her heart beating fast and her cheeks stained red. "Who else was close to Regina?"

"Not many people." She refused to meet his eyes. "Sheelagh, me, and her sister Caro, but she lives out east. Regina kept to herself a lot."

"Was she involved in any clubs or groups?" He found himself wanting to touch her again, to feel the fresh, virgin blood surging under her warm, tanned skin. He stretched out his hand. She wasn't looking at him and wouldn't see..., but at the last moment, he pulled his hand back reluctantly.

His body responded to her nearness, nostrils widening slightly to catch the spoor of the hunt. He forced the reaction down, but not before he'd caught the whiff of her scent. It traveled through his senses like a bolt of lightning, and he stood absolutely still, fighting the urge to take her *now*. He could almost feel the soft heat of her skin, see her helpless before him, taste the fresh blood on his lips. He licked them unconsciously, and then brought his body under control. He'd sworn never to take a human life again, and this girl was testing his control like nothing he'd ever experienced before. He could sate his lust for blood, but not for the emotions that should come with it. And now it was stronger than anything he'd experienced before, even with Alyce.

And Alyce was dead. She'd died because of him. He couldn't forget that. Even while LaCroix had drained most of her blood, she'd stayed alive long enough to die in his arms. He'd felt her breathe her last as LaCroix burned slowly in the flames, and at that moment, he would have gladly given his life for hers. But he couldn't give life, he could only take it. And so he held her, hating himself for not being able to cry, and cradling her dead body in his arms. He would have died then too, if instinct hadn't made him flee the flames. He often wondered since then if he would have been happier if he'd stayed.

He came back to himself to find her watching him curiously, her eyes drifting over him in frank appreciation.

"I'm sorry, but can you repeat that?"

"Well, she only went to the Feminist Alliance once. She told me afterwards that all the women in there were also members of the Gay and Lesbian alliance. She felt so uncomfortable that she never went back."

"Did she have any favorite hangouts?"

She dropped her eyes as soon as he met them with his, a faint redness once again suffusing her cheeks. She pulled back an errant lock of hair and examined it closely as she replied. "Besides her room? No. She spent most of her time alone."

"So she was a loner?" It didn't look like there would be many suspects. With no boyfriend and her isolating herself, there would be very few indeed. Unfortunately, this Lysana Nathan would be one of them. Technically, that was. He saw how she'd blamed herself for her friend's death, and he was willing to bet anything she was innocent. Unfortunately, he couldn't prove that.

"Not a loner so much as happy being by herself. She wasn't the rebel type, just very self-absorbed. She was happiest when she was alone with a book. She could read for hours, and most of the time you'd forget she was even there." Her eyes were dreamy as she relived some memory. After a few moments, she gave herself a mental shake — he could see it in her eyes — and returned her attention solely to him. "Do you have any other questions?"

He decided to tease her a little. "Just one. What was your friend Miri talking about? DHM?"

Her face went totally red before she hid it in both hands. Looking away quickly, she mumbled

a reply. "It's her rating system for men. DHM means 'Definite hunk material'. She has lots of descriptions like that." Blushing deeper (if that was possible), she met his eyes for a brief moment and then looked away again.

He smiled suddenly. Well, that certainly explained the girl Miri's behavior. For a moment she had reminded him of... Ghislaine.

A frown wiped away his smile. Yes, he could see a marked similarity between the two. Ghislaine's coquettish behavior had often irritated him. Only this Miri lacked Ghislaine's cold heart. And that was for the better. He still owed Ghislaine...ah, but she called herself Jeanette now, for helping him escape from LaCroix, and knew she would use it someday, probably at the most inconvenient time. But she would enjoy collecting, of that he was sure.

"I'm sorry if she bothered you. She embarrasses me a lot. I think she loves doing it." Her voice was warm, but weak.

"I wasn't bothered by her," he told her with a smile. "I was thinking of someone else."

"Oh." She looked down at her feet and then up at him again. "Thanks. For everything. You didn't have to tell me. I just wanted to thank you." Her voice was warm and soft and he was tempted to touch her shoulder again, but he pulled his hand back even as his fingers stretched out.

"Hey, Knight!" He watched her flinch as Schanke threw the door wide with a bang. Barely giving her a glance, the other detective hooked a finger over his shoulder.

"Did you see that girl? What a hickey, eh?"

Nick watched as Lysana stiffened, her eyes going cold and flinty. Schanke laughed at his own joke. "Who was she going out with? A vampire?" He stood and chortled, his face pink with mirth.

Lysana's lips moved, and he caught her whispers clearly. "If he makes another joke, so help me, I'll kill him myself." Then, she looked at him. "Who is this boor?" she asked, her face wrinkling in distaste.

"My partner." He told her, and watched her sigh.

"It's going to be a *long* night."

"Tell me about it."

Back in the girls' room, Schanke made a few more jokes, and having exhausted his limited wit for the evening, he reviewed Nick's notes. Lysana sat and glared at him, her face set into a stony mask.

Eventually, she and Miri withdrew to the couch, where Lysana picked up a book and made the pretense of reading. Nick caught the title, *Those Who Hunt the Night*. It looked well read. His eyes flickered to the bookshelf. Most of the books seemed to be in a similar vein. *Lust for Blood*, *Blood Rites*, *In the Blood* and, of course, *Good Guys Wear Fangs*. He permitted himself a tight grin before continuing on with his search.

"Which dresser was hers?" he asked.

Sheelagh spoke up hesitantly. "She and I shared one. She had the top three drawers and half of the closet." She came over and pointed them out. He opened the top drawer and was confronted by a mound of frilly underthings.

He caught himself just in time to keep from blushing. He'd never gotten used to seeing women's fripperies, even after these many years. Some of his childhood still remained. Unfortunately, it was something he would gladly have given up.

Lysana was at his side in moments. "Need some help?" she asked softly. "Not many men feel comfortable pawing through women's panties."

"All right." He chose his words carefully, but she still shot him a look of amusement, her eyes twinkling in mirth. He was glad she could find amusement in something, but the thought died as a look of sadness swept over her face. After a few moments, she composed herself, and her face was carefully blank.

"What are we looking for?" Her voice, none too steady and with an undertone of pain, was still soft and musical.

"I'll tell you if and when we find it."

She sorted through the panties and bras, folding them quickly atop the dresser with tender efficiency. When the dresser was empty, she placed the folded clothes within.

The next drawer held socks and shirts. The third drawer was pay dirt, her school notebooks, covered with childish scrawls and ornate hearts.

"Do you mind if we take these?" he asked.

She smiled tightly. "I don't think anyone here will object if you do." She continued in a tone that was falsely bright. "After all, she doesn't need them anymore, does she?" Her voice was as tight and high as a strung wire at the end of the sentence, and her eyes wet at the corners. She covered her eyes with one hand, putting the other one out, palm up, to forestall him. "I'll be all right," she mumbled brokenly. "Just...just give me a minute."

He touched her shoulder gently, intending only to comfort her, but the beat of her pulse was too strong. He could feel the rich heat of her blood right through her skin, and his higher intentions flew out the window so quickly that he was lost. Lost in the feel of her skin, in the wonderful scent of her. His lips parted slightly, and he could feel his gums begin to ache.

He hated every moment of those feelings, and loved them at the same time, and hated himself that much more because he did so. He couldn't help himself. His body was responding without thought, and though he tried to break away, he just... couldn't.

Her fingers grazed his cheek, and he started, nearly jumping away from her. "I'll be all right now. Really," she said, her eyes warm.

Her fingers were so soft. And so hot.... Disturbed by his lack of control, he let a frown sweep over his features. A sudden blush flamed her cheeks and she retreated nervously, although that hadn't been his intention.

He must be hungry. He'd long ago trained himself to ignore the sensations of his peculiar hunger, but there was no reason to believe otherwise. Or perhaps he was just deluding himself. But he didn't want to need her, didn't want to need her blood, her life.

A pair of accusing eyes swam briefly before him, and he had to wrench his head away from the vision. No! He would never kill again. He'd made that vow so long ago, alone in the dark. And in the dark he must remain, until he died. He knew that he was a coward, accepted it in his soul. It took courage to face the sun, a courage he didn't have.

He swung around to find the girl — Lysana, he corrected himself, standing with her back to the wall, her face unutterably weary. Her shoulders drooped, and she played listlessly with the neckline of her nightgown. Finally, she sagged back against the wall, closing her eyes.

"Why don't you have a seat?" he asked, his voice seeming much too loud in the quiet of the room.

She started, shooting upright, her eyes wide, but then shook her head. "If I sit down, I'll fall asleep, and your *partner*," she emphasized the word with a particular venom, "still has to talk to me." She glanced at the door to the storeroom. "I wonder what they are doing in there." She shot him a glance of sleepy mischief. "I hope Miri isn't putting the moves on him."

He shook his head, picking up a bored female yawn from inside the storeroom. "He's married."

"I hope *he* remembers that. Miri in large doses has been known to try men's souls." She grinned. "Or certain of their body parts."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she clapped both hands over her lips, as if she could somehow hold the words in. She blushed deeply. "I can't believe I said that," she remarked, half to herself. "I've been hanging around Miri way too long." She returned her attention fully to him. "You must forgive me, I don't usually say things like that."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm sure he can talk to you tomorrow." He knocked on the door to the storeroom, and then poked his head in. Miri had her arms wrapped around herself, and Schanke was giving more attention to her body than his notes.

"I think it's time we went," he told his partner. Schanke took a minute to refocus on Nick, and while his attention was thus occupied, Miri slipped out of the room.

"I still haven't talked to that other girl," he protested.

"You can always come back tomorrow," Nick told him bluntly. "Right now, they're tired. We'll be able to get more out of them when they're rested."

"Yeah, you're right." Schanke flipped his notebook shut and followed Nick back into the common

room. Miri was stretched out on one bed, Sheelagh on another, only her face peeking out from the tangle of covers. Lysana was still standing, rubbing sleep-bleary eyes. Still, when she caught sight of Schanke, she gave him a hard stare.

Oblivious, he went to the door. Nick smiled to himself as she yawned and brushed back sleep-kinked locks from her face. "Tomorrow, then." Her voice was cool. "Goodnight, detectives." They heard the door lock behind them, but only Nick heard her feet pad across the floor and the creak of the bedsprings. As her breathing stilled into the rhythm of sleep, he wrenched his mind away from the thought of her and back to his partner.

Schanke waited until they were outside to start talking. "Did you see that brunette girl?" he said, chortling. "She couldn't take her eyes off of me." He turned towards Nick, his expression serious. "I think she likes me."

"Too bad you're married," Nick pointed out, his tone dry.

"Myra doesn't have to know." The tone of his voice belied his words, as if he were saying them more to make himself believe them than because he meant them.

Nick refrained from replying, merely shaking his head. Schanke kept on, oblivious to his partner's amused disbelief as they walked to the crime scene. Already, uniformed patrolmen were scouring the grassy area for evidence. The girl's body was gone, only a small hardened pool of blood leaving any clue that a body had recently rested there.

Nick glanced up at the sky. A dusting of stars hovered near the horizon, but he could feel dawn approaching as a faint heat across his cheeks. The heat would only get stronger, he knew, until he got inside, away from the blistering heat of the sun.

"...Isn't here." He came back to himself just in time to hear the last part of Schanke's comment.

"What was that?"

"I said, too bad your pal Jack isn't here. He could tell us more about what happened." Schanke glanced at Nick once, and then returned his gaze to the crime scene.

"Yeah. He'll be back soon enough." Back to telling him how to live his life. Back to telling him what to do. At times, it made him sick. It seemed like this treatment had gone on forever, and what had he to show for it? Nothing. Nothing but hope, and even that was rapidly fading. He'd struggled all his life against the maddening call of blood, but it wasn't working. Nothing he'd tried had ever worked, and now, when he'd finally worked up the courage to try Jack's science, even that had failed him.

These thoughts sustained Nick all the way to his car, but even the drive back home could bring him no relief. Once, the sensations of speed and the wind whipping at his hair had been enough to calm his mind and uplift his spirit. But even that no longer helped. Nothing ever seemed to lighten the darkness he lived in. He grimaced sourly. And nothing ever would.

Unbidden, the image of the dark-haired girl formed in his head. Her eyes twinkled impishly as her lips curved in amusement. The royal blue nightgown flirted with her curves, floated silkily over her breasts while clinging tightly to her stomach. He closed his eyes. No! He must stop this! Giving in to even the most momentary weakness could leave her dead, another pair of eyes staring accusingly back at him from his dreams.

Still, when he had driven home and quenched his deadly thirst from the bottles in the fridge, he fell asleep thinking of her.

\*

"Nick, you've got to go up to the college again," the Watch Sergeant said as he checked in. "There's been another murder — a lot like the last one."

Nick nodded and was on his way within minutes. This past four days of hard work had turned up no solid clues. All the trails had led nowhere. And now there was another killing. Somehow this person had killed again. Oh, sure it could have been another murderer, but that was just too much coincidence for him to stomach. Or was it a rogue vampire? This early in the game, he couldn't throw away that possibility either.

They found the body tucked into a small stand of trees. She was sitting with her back against the

bole of an oak. With her head turned to one side, she might merely have been taking a nap. But there was a brownish-red stain on the bark under her chin, and she was far too pale.

The dead face was tranquil in repose, leading Schanke to remark, "She probably didn't even see it coming."

Nick merely nodded, checking the wound on her throat. Once again, a ragged tear marred the column of her throat. He let the girl's head rest back against the tree once more, and turned to look at his partner. "What have we got on her?"

Schanke consulted his notebook. "Susannah Martin. Theater student." He stopped upon seeing Nick's look. "Yeah, another one. She's in the play, too." He paused, looked at the body and amended his words. "Was in the play." Glancing at his notebook again, he went on. "Missing two days, roommate thought, and I quote, 'She was with her boyfriend or something'. Apparently they weren't too close." He flipped the notebook closed and slid it back into the pocket of his coat. "I'm going to interview the roommate. You never know."

"Fine. I'm going to check out the theater." With one last, regretful look at the dead girl, so demure and innocent in death, Nick strode away.

\*

The Roger Miller Memorial Theater was a gray stone building, small and compact, built atop a small hill. Inside, the seats were placed amphitheater-style, reaching three quarters of the way around the proscenium.

The stage itself projected out into the center slightly and was currently the scene of much activity. The pounding racket of hammers and saws filled the building, and stagehands scurried left and right carrying wood and ladders and paint buckets and dropcloths. Meanwhile, a group of actors tried to rehearse against the back wall. They constantly moved away in different directions to get out of the way of five people painting a wooded scene on the back wall.

Nick grinned to himself as he watched the frantic activity, finally ascending the steps to the stage itself. Somewhere backstage, a radio began to blare, sending the strains of "Achy Breaky Heart" drifting through the air.

The actors got disgusted and adjourned elsewhere, and he stepped closer to ask questions when he noticed Lysana was one of the scenery painters. Apparently, this last week had not been kind to her.

She looked bone-weary, with dark circles under her eyes. Her skin was pale, and her hair was gathered into a straggly bun on the back of her head. Her brush moved listlessly as she painted leaves on a tree. She bit her lip and stopped painting to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand.

He walked up to the ladder and smiled up at her. "Hello."

She jumped, nearly upsetting the can of paint, but caught it just in time. "You're here about Susie, aren't you?"

He regarded her with a level stare. "I'm surprised you know so much."

"She was my friend. When she didn't show up, I suspected the worst. I heard they found a body this morning, and that's when I knew." She abandoned trying to paint, setting the brush to one side. "Who could do something like this? I knew Regina and Suzanne both. They never did anything to hurt anyone."

Nick sighed as her eyes searched his. Even after all this time, he hadn't found an answer to that question. "Sometimes there are no reasons. I'm afraid I can't give you an answer."

She looked away finally, wiping her hands on a rag, copper eyes hooded. "That's all right, I wasn't really expecting one."

"What was Susannah like?" he said, hoping to draw her out.

"A loner, just like Reg. She'd been in a few plays in summer stock, and she had her mind set on making it on Broadway. She was good enough, but well, she kept to herself."

"Was she snobbish?" he asked.

"No, she just didn't go out of her way to make friends. She reminded me of Grizabella from *Cats*, just drifting around the edges." She hesitated, and then went on. "She really didn't care what people thought of her."

"Did she have any enemies?" he asked.

She shrugged. "She wasn't the kind to make enemies. Or friends, either."

"Then how did you become her friend?"

One of the other girls painting looked up at that. "She's everybody's friend. Didn't you know that?" The girl grinned impishly at both of them before returning to her painting.

"So, you're everybody's friend, eh?" he asked. "Will you be my friend?" He was only joking, but she raised her eyes to his, gentle and golden, and it was no longer any kind of a joke.

"Why?" her voice was mild. "Do you need a friend?" When he couldn't reply, she smiled. "I'd be happy to consider you a friend."

He looked away, no longer able to withstand that wise golden gaze. When he finally looked back, she smiled and looked away herself.

"All that armor," she said, half to herself. "I wonder what it's hiding." Then, she smiled at him again. "I suppose you want to interview some of us here, as well."

"Anybody who talked to her before she disappeared," he replied.

She nodded wearily and dismounted from the ladder. Once again, he was struck by her look. It was that of someone on the last ounce of energy. He was willing to bet she'd only had an hour or two of sleep since her friend died. She moved with the exaggerated care of the weary, and her gaze was fixed on a point about two feet above the floor.

"What were you painting?" he asked.

"The backdrop of the forest scene. We've already painted the asylum and Lucy's house. They'll be suspended from the fly dolly." Seeing his look, she smiled distantly. "They're on pieces of paper. When they change the scenery, they just swing away the dolly."

She led him down into the bowels of the stage, where the noise was less. The actors he'd seen before were running their lines in a small room. Although the door said "Sound proof", he could still hear them.

Lysana knocked and was admitted. She motioned for him to follow, and closed the door behind her, cutting down the noise level to an acceptable minimum. They looked at him curiously, and then to Lysana for an explanation.

"He's here about Susannah. She's dead." The bleakness of her face assured them she wasn't joking.

"We'll help you any way we can," one young man said.

"Your name?" Nick asked.

"Robin Dell. I play Van Helsing. I only saw Susann when we rehearsed, and then, not much. We only have one scene together."

"And in it, he kills her," one of the women noted wryly. "I'm Janet Wintermuit. I'm a lowly maid, and I get to scream a lot." Forestalling Nick's question, she said, "I don't have any scenes with her, I'm afraid, and she kept to herself. I only saw her at rehearsals, and, like Robin said, not much even then."

"She seemed nice," commented a third man. "I dated her once, but it never came to more than that." He paused.

"And your name?"

"John Ashford." He looked very earnest, but a little fearful as well. Being a policeman tended to have that effect on people, and Nick was used to it. "She wasn't interested in anything else besides making it big in New York. It was off-putting to be around." He paused again. "Oh, and I play Jonathan Harker."

A red-haired woman reached out to put a hand on his arm. "I'm Vickie Neuworth. I play Wilhelmina, his devoted fiancé and general extraordinary woman." She smiled toothily. "I knew Susanne, but not well. She could tell you what was good or bad in your performance, and I worked with her for a while. But," she made a face. "John's right. She was a definite one-note personality. All she cared about was the theater. Nothing else interested her. All her music was from Broadway shows, and her room was plastered with theater posters. I got nervous after a while. It was like she was driven or something."

The last actor in the group was standing back, giving Nick a strange stare. "What right do you have to be asking us these questions?"

"You're not under interrogation, sir, if that's what you mean," Nick said, with a disarming smile.

"You're from the *police*?" The man spat the word as if it were an obscenity.

Lysana's lips compressed, her eyes flashing with golden fire. "This is no time for your prejudices, Brad. Two people are *dead*. Two *friends* of mine are dead, and I want to see the slime who killed them caught." Her chest heaved, but her eyes still glittered like shards of living flame, and Brad's swallow was noisy in the silence that followed her outburst.

She gave Brad another hard stare, and at last, he submitted. "I'm Brad Temple," he began, his voice a flat hard line of frustration, crossing his arms over his chest while his face twisted into a grimace of distaste. "I play Dracula. I didn't know Susannah or Regina all that well. I only saw them at rehearsals and I didn't socialize with either of them."

"Come on, Brad," Vickie said, her tone light. "We all know you were sniffing around Susannah's skirts for the longest time."

Brad's face went red, then white, and he stormed for the door, leaving with a slam that nearly shattered the glass. "Bad attitude," Robin observed.

Janet merely looked thoughtful. "I thought he looked scared."

Lysana nodded. "He *was* scared."

John frowned at Vickie. "You just about accused him of lying to a cop. Hell, you just about accused *him*. I think he was right to get angry. And scared."

Nick smiled. "People lie to us all the time."

Lysana shook her head. "Only when they have something to hide."

Nick's grin turned wolfish. "Everybody has *something* to hide."

He finished interviewing the others, and then Lysana showed him around the theater. None of the others could remember Suzannah acting anything out of the ordinary. Didn't remember or wouldn't tell him, he silently amended. Still, he got the feeling that what they said was mostly the truth.

Damn, it was frustrating! Two women so totally ordinary and with so few true friends. And no clues. He glanced up at Lysana. The one woman who seemed to know them both was tearing herself apart inside with guilt, and she wasn't even responsible.

He listened half-heartedly to the nickel tour of the theater, with the back and understage tours, the lightbox in the wings, the droning recital of how many people the theater seated and so on. But at last, it was over, and they were on the stage once more. The scene had changed little; mainly the radio was now playing "Free Falling".

Lysana climbed the ladder once more, deftly moving past stagehands carrying props for Lucy's house. Nick moved closer, and she turned, brush in hand.

At the same moment, a stagehand with his arms full of two by eights hurried past. Lysana rocked once, a low cry of startlement springing from her lips as the ladder rocked under her. She tried desperately to keep her balance, but she was too tired and it was far too late. She cried out once again in fright as the ladder finally tipped completely over.

Before he could even think, he was there underneath her, catching her in his arms. She was so light! It was like catching a bag full of feathers. Still, he went to one knee, cradling her to his chest.

For one long moment, they stayed like that, his face in her hair, inhaling the clean scent of strawberries and peaches. He could feel her chest move as she breathed. He could almost feel her shock and surprise as she realized that she wasn't hurt and that he had caught her.

Reluctantly, he let her go, drinking in the warmth of her in his arms. She stayed where she was a moment longer, and then stiffened, pushing herself to her feet. Her face was white as she turned to face him, her eyes and voice distant. "I...thank you for catching me."

"My pleasure," he told her. "I'm just glad you weren't seriously hurt."

She nodded once, nervously. "I'm okay."

Nick's eyes scanned the crowd, and he spotted the stagehand rushing towards him, his hands now empty. His face was panicked, his eyes wide. "I never even felt the wood hit the ladder! I'm sorry."

Lysana transferred her eyes to the greasy young man. "It's all right, Kevin. I'm not hurt. You can thank the detective here for that." Her tone was distant, and Nick gave her a worried glance.

Kevin nodded, pushing a stringy lock of hair back behind his ear. "I've never seen anybody move so fast," he said, transferring his gaze to Nick. "Did you run track or something?" In quick flashes his

eyes took Nick in, his gaze never stopping in any one place for long.

"Captain of the team three years in a row," Nick lied with a grin. "You'd better be more careful from now on, though. Someone will get hurt if you don't look where you're going."

Kevin nodded again, his face turning ashen as he backed away. Nick turned back to Lysana, who gave him a particularly searching glance before reaching down to right the ladder. As she bent down to pick it up, her knees wobbled and she went to one knee, her chin almost touching her chest.

Nick went over to take her by the arm. "When was the last time you ate?" he asked, his expression grim.

"Uh...." She closed her eyes and was silent for a long time. "I'm not sure," she said at last. "I think I had dinner on Monday."

Three days ago. Wonderful. He pulled her gently to her feet. "Get your things," he told her. "I'm taking you out for dinner."

"But I have a class at..." she protested weakly, trying to pull away. When it was obvious his mind was made up, she nodded wearily and fetched a purse and some books from a locker in the back. Although the lockers themselves were equipped with key locks, most had other locks hanging from them as well. "What are these for?" he asked, fingering the extra locks.

"There have been a lot of locker break-ins. Some of us *like* to keep our stuff."

She led him across the campus to the Student Union, where a fire was blazing merrily away in the hearth in the center of the dining area. The room itself was cozy, with leather chairs and a few real wood tables. There was even a non-smoking section.

There were few people about this time of night, but the dinner line was still open, and she went up to the counter. He paid for it quickly, and soon they were seated in the no-smoking section, as far from the fire as possible.

She hesitated as she came towards the table with the tray. She waited until he was seated before making for the chair furthest away from him. He glanced at her face, which was white with tension. The dishes clattered as she set the tray on the table, and she jumped visibly. "Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

She considered this. "I'm a little scared," she confessed. "I just thought that whoever killed Suzie and Regina is running around right now. I mean, he — or she — could be here in this room right now." She stared down at her lap, her hands clenched.

"We'll catch him," Nick said, laying his hand on top of hers.

She flinched once again as he touched her, and he cursed the coolness of his skin. But she lifted her eyes to his, expression wary. "What if it's someone the police can't touch?"

"Whatever you may have heard on TV, it's not the truth. There is no one the police can't touch."

"Really." It was obvious she didn't believe him.

"Do you have an idea who it is?" His eyes pierced hers, and she deflated instantly. "No," she muttered hopelessly. "I don't know for sure. I could be wrong, and it would be wrong to accuse someone when I don't know."

"Tell me who you suspect," he said, suddenly commanding.

"I..." She stared deep into his eyes, then yanked her eyes away. "No. I couldn't. It's *wrong*."

He sighed. She certainly was strong-willed, and it wasn't so important. He could tell who she suspected, because he already suspected Brad himself. "You haven't even started eating your sandwich," he pointed out. "I don't want my hard-earned money to have gone for nothing." He moved to the chair next to hers and gently coaxed her to eat it.

Her warm brown eyes rested on him. "Would you like some?"

"*If only she knew what she was offering,*" he thought, pulling his gaze from the veins throbbing just below the surface of her skin. "No, thank you. I ate earlier, and I'm full."

She looked down at the sandwich, pushing and pulling the plate back and forth with a few jerks of her fingers. Finally, she raised the golden-crusted bread to her mouth and took a small bite. She chewed slowly, her face a mask of pain. Her sandwich thudded to the plate as twin pools of tears brimmed in her eyes. She groped for her napkin with one hand, using the other one to hide her obvious grief.

The muscles of her neck were taut with the effort of holding in her sobs, and he took her by the

shoulders and pulled her to him, her face warm against his chest as he stroked her hair. Her scent wafted up to him, warm and alive. He could barely keep himself from sinking his fangs into her neck and, since he couldn't bring himself to push her away, he buried his face in her hair until he could control himself once more.

She sobbed into his chest, and slowly, with many hesitations, put her arms around him. He continued to stroke her hair, inhaling the sweet scent of her body. She wore no perfume, and her natural scent was intoxicating. His head swam, and when she raised her face to his, eyes closed, he kissed her.

Her eyes sprang open, but her mouth was warm and soft, her lips gentle on his. Slowly, she closed her eyes again and sagged into the strong support of his arms.

When they broke for air, she smiled up at him. "Thank you," she said softly. They were so close, he could feel her lips move against his.

"What for?"

"For everything." She kissed him again lightly, her eyes flickering to a point past him. As she did so, her expression became one of alarm. "Science! I'll be late!" Springing up, she grabbed her pocketbook and ran for the door.

He watched her go, smiling to himself.

\*

Schanke found him later, and they compared notes. He left out the part in the Student Union, of course, but Schanke kept pressing him for details about Lysana. "Look," Schanke said. "She must know something about why two of her friends have died. I'm sure she's involved somehow."

Nick shook his head. "Not from the way she's reacting. I have a feeling about her. She's just an innocent bystander to all of this. If you saw her, you'd know."

Schanke snorted in amusement. "So, where is she now?"

"Science class." Nick grinned suddenly, remembering the kiss, and how she'd melted into his arms. She tasted so sweet...

"Maybe you're getting too close to her for your own good." Schanke said, giving Nick a considering glance.

"No, that's not it at all." Nick's expression was obstinate.

"She's a pretty girl. It wouldn't be the first time a cop fell for a pretty face." Schanke, waxing eloquent, spread his hands slightly. "You just have to make sure they don't screw up your perception."

"I know she's innocent." Nick said. How could he explain the turmoil and guilt he'd seen in her eyes? How he'd had to command her to stop blaming herself for Regina Hill's death? "I can't explain how I know. Call it a hunch if you want, but I know she didn't kill her friends."

Schanke nodded. "All right then, I'll trust your judgment. She doesn't fit the profile of a serial killer anyway. But, I have to know. How do you feel about her?"

"That's none of your business." Nick's voice was flat.

"You like her that much, huh?" Schanke said with a grin. Nick allowed himself a tight nod. "And I suppose she likes you, too?" Nick made no reply, and Schanke grinned anyway. "Lucky dog. Some guys have all the luck."

The sound of running footsteps made them wheel, but it was just a young man, a student. "Are...are you the... detectives?" he asked, panting for breath.

They both nodded. The young man bent part way over, hands on his thighs. "You'd better come. They found another body."

Nick gestured for the man to lead the way, while Schanke began to curse softly and fluently, trailing off into Polish as they jogged off after him.

Back behind one of the dorms, a lone picnic table was bolted to a concrete slab. Ten feet away, off to one side, was a stand of grassy brush and immature trees. The body lay in between, face down, head turned slightly to one side. Red hair spilled down the girl's back, nearly touching the battered blue jeans she wore. A pair of Reeboks and a paint-spattered shirt completed her outfit. The pale moonlight threw her freckles into high relief, jogging Nick's memory. One of the set painters... Yes, that was it. She had

been painting with Lysana earlier this evening.

And now she was dead. One hand was splayed across the lawn, as if she had been trying to get up enough strength to get to the dorm. Unfortunately, she'd never made it.

He turned to the group of students gathered on the lawn. "Does anybody here know her?" he asked.

A young man stepped forward timidly, his hand raised. "I knew her."

Nick gestured him forwards, leaving Schanke to sprint off towards the phone to call the station. "What was her name?"

"Barbara. Barbara Norwick. She had a single down the hall from me." The stocky young man scratched his dark, curly hair and continued. "I saw her out the window earlier. She was making out with some guy."

"Did you see who it was?" Nick tried not to sound either overjoyed or anxious, although he was both. Finally, somebody had seen the killer.

"No. It was pretty dark out. I... I watched for a while, but it got boring, and I had to study." He moved a little closer, glancing over his shoulder to see if any one had heard him. "Watching isn't really my thing."

"What time did you see the man out here with her?" Nick asked, taking notes in his own neat shorthand.

"About an hour ago." He plucked at the sparse hairs covering his chin. "That sounds about right."

"What did the man look like?" Nick asked, piercing the student with his intense, midnight blue eyes.

"Uh.... Dark. Not too tall. He had on jeans and a T-shirt with something written on it, but I couldn't see who it was." He thought a while longer and shrugged. "That's all I can remember."

"How was his hair styled? Straight? Curly?"

"Straight."

"Was he fat or thin?"

"Medium, from what I could see." The man shifted nervously, and Nick smiled at him.

"You're doing just fine..."

"Jason. Jason Rudemeyer." He was visibly shaking now. *He must have realized how close he came to seeing her killer*, Nick thought as he guided the boy to a seat on the picnic table.

"You're doing just fine, Jason. Just relax. Now, how tall do you think he was?"

"Medium height. Maybe about four inches taller than Barb."

"All right. Thank you for your help. Where can we reach you if we need to talk to you some more?"

"Denby Hall, room 210, suite A." Jason mumbled. He continued to sit there even as Nick moved back to the other students.

The others were still staring in horrified fascination at the body. "Did anyone see anything else here tonight?" he asked. Some students shook their heads, while others gave no sign of having heard him. Still, they had a description now. It was their first real break since the whole thing started.

Schanke raced back and Nick filled him in. Schanke asked Jason a few more questions of his own, but was unable to get any more information out of the horrified young man, who was now weeping like a child, his face in his hands.

Eventually, a young woman made her way up to them. "My name is Zoe Harper. I lived across from Barbara." Although her voice was calm and even, her face wore a faintly shell-shocked expression. "You asked if anyone knew her. I did." Her voice was barely a whisper on the last two words.

"Did she have a boyfriend?" Schanke asked.

A ghost of a smile brushed Zoe's lips. "Dozens, but no one steady. I don't think she'd gone out with anyone in about three weeks."

"Was that usual?" Schanke asked, scribbling furiously.

"No." Zoe shook her head. "You see, she sort of couldn't go out with anyone for a while. It's embarrassing, but..."

"Was she sick?"

"In a way. Her last boyfriend gave her...uh..." She trailed off, not knowing how to politely phrase it.

"VD?" Schanke supplied.

"Yes." Zoe's cheeks colored. "And it was worse. She thought she was pregnant. That's why she wasn't going out with anyone." She spread her hands. "She never told me who she thought the father was but, to be truthful, I didn't have much sympathy for her. Someone who screws around without taking precautions is an idiot."

"Or in this case," she glanced at where the body lay, "A dead idiot." Her face was unreadable.

"Could you tell us who she was going out with?" Nick asked.

"I don't know if I could tell you all of her boyfriends, but I'll tell you who I know about." She rattled off a list of about twelve names, most of whom Nick didn't recognize. Brad, however, was one of them. Curiouser and curioser.

He certainly had a motive to kill this girl, if he was the father of her child. Or even if he only *thought* he was the father. Men had been known to kill for less.

Unfortunately, he had no motive for killing the two other girls. The same person had killed all three, he was sure. The wounds were too similar to be the work of a copycat. He studied the pool of blood half-concealed by the cooling body. Once again, a broad rip scarred the flesh of the girl's throat. A chunk of flesh dangled from the edge of the wound, contrasting oddly with the wide green eyes, still open in death. The expression on her face was filled with wonder, as though she couldn't believe death had come for her so soon. It was obvious it was not the work of a vampire; no real vampire would have been this messy. His kind had kept their feeding secret, and it would have taken a very young and inexperienced vampire to let someone watch him as he fed. But one so young and careless would have left some sort of clue.

He would have to investigate the people from the theater as soon as possible, tonight if he could. All of the deaths so far were women who had been connected with the theater. Since the women were in such out-of-the-way places, and indeed, seemed to have gone there willingly, it stood to reason that the killer was someone they knew. Even someone they trusted. And where else to start looking but where they all came together, the theater?

At this time, the black and white rolled up, followed by the paramedics. While Schanke helped them go over the crime scene, Nick headed for the theater once again, hoping that all the actors would still be there.

\*

It was quieter now, less busy. The radio was silent, and the actors were out in front, rehearsing. Brad stood to one side, clad in a pair of black pants and a black turtleneck, heightening the contrast between his dark hair and fair skin.

Robin, as Van Helsing, was delivering some typically pompous speech with a serious look on his face. He wore a shabby suit jacket and a pair of coke bottle spectacles. In his left hand he carried a bible, and pounded on it with his fist as he expounded a point.

The other actors listened with rapt expressions as he rambled on and on. Finally, he finished, and a discussion began, with Van Helsing doing most of the talking.

Inevitably, the scene flowed into the confrontation at Lucy's tomb. Nick watched, spellbound, as the stake pounded home with a dull thud. A wailing scream split the air, and was cut off abruptly. The actors, looking deeply moved, crossed themselves or grasped at the large wooden crosses they wore around their necks, staring solemnly into the casket.

He clapped, and they looked up, startled. Hesitant grins broke their somber faces and a few drifted towards him. "Good performance," he told them.

Vickie blushed and smiled. "Thanks. It's good to know somebody appreciates us. What can we do for you?"

"There's been another killing," he said. The expressions of shock and disbelief were replaced by fear as they glanced uneasily at each other, drawing into a tighter group. It was obvious that none of them

suspected any of the others.

"Who was it?" Janet asked, her voice subdued.

"Barbara Norwick." Nick's voice was quickly overpowered by the babble as they discussed this among themselves. All except for one brawny, blonde-haired young jock, who turned to face Brad, rage in his eyes.

"You slimy bastard," he said, his voice deadly quiet but still managing to be heard above the others. "I saw you ask her if you could escort her home. You killed her, didn't you?" Murderous rage and fury warred across the young man's face as he leapt upon Brad and began pummeling him.

"Help!" Brad called, but nobody seemed inclined to lift a finger in his defense, their faces stony and tight. "I didn't do it! Help me!" he screeched, trying to defend himself. Only the other boy was all over him, and it didn't help at all.

"That's *enough!*" The shout startled everyone into immobility, including Nick, who'd been about to step in and stop the fight himself. Lysana stepped out of the wings, her face cold and angry. She strode over to the two men, still in mid-fight, and pulled them roughly apart.

"I have had enough of this!" she said. "Whatever he's done, he doesn't deserve you beating up on him."

"He killed Barbara," the jock insisted, sweeping his tangled platinum 'tail back into place.

Lysana turned to look at Brad before facing the jock again. "Like I said before, he doesn't deserve you beating on him. If he's guilty, he'll go to jail for it. That will be punishment enough, even if we don't think so. Don't put yourself on his level."

The jock, looking somewhat shamefaced now, ducked his head in agreement. She held her gaze on him for a few minutes longer, and then whirled to face Brad, who'd been trying to sneak away, her look so intense it made the other man squirm.

"I don't know whether you're guilty or not, but you've been acting very suspiciously, and that I *don't* like. From this day onward, I don't want to see you unless I have to." She spun away and walked to the edge of the stage, shoulders heaving.

"Another friend dead," she whispered softly, her voice thick with unshed tears. "When is it going to end?"

Vickie went over and put her arms around Lysana's shoulders. "I've never seen you like this before," she said, as the others moved off into the wings. "Why are you acting like this?"

Lysana's voice was strained with weariness and guilt. "Because three of my friends are dead, and I haven't gotten any sleep since Regina died. This isn't an everyday occurrence, I assure you." Her face twisted in bitter mockery, but soon dissolved into grief. "I'm not sure how much more of this I can take, Vickie. They were my friends. Just because I'm friends with all of you doesn't make losing three any easier."

"Of course not," Vickie replied. "I wasn't really close to Reg, Susie or Barb, but it doesn't mean I don't miss them." She sighed. "Or don't want to cry because they're dead."

Lysana nodded, and then glanced over at Nick, her face becoming contemplative. Excusing herself, she walked over to him.

"I thought you had a class," he said.

"I did. I chose not to go. I couldn't — can't — concentrate on bioscience when three of my friends are dead." She sighed deeply and sat, perching on the lip of the stage. "I want to apologize for the way I acted earlier. I was pretty horrible, and...."

"There's nothing to forgive you for," Nick said. "You're under a lot of stress. That can do funny things to you." He shifted uncomfortably. "If anything, I'm sorry I took advantage of you."

"You're sorry you kissed me?" she asked softly.

He nodded, unable to speak.

"Well, I'm not," she replied. "That kiss brought me to my senses and made me forget for a while. Believe me, you didn't take advantage of me. If anything, I wanted it as much, if not more, than you did." She grinned in self-deprecating honesty. "I'd like to do it again sometime."

"That can be arranged," he told her.

"Oh, can it? Well, how about right now?" She leaned forward intently, her eyes all wide golden

innocence.

He pulled back slightly. If he continued this way, he'd take that innocence and break it, forget himself and... kill her. He stood still, shocked. How could he have forgotten who...or more importantly, *what* he was?

He'd never be able to have a relationship with her, not even friendship. That was too dangerous for the needs that roared through his body right now. The need to kiss her, hold her close, to stroke the sweet flesh of her throat with his tongue, feeling the pulse of life run through her veins, was too great.

And then the hideous pleasure of his fangs piercing the skin of her neck, feeling the blood spurt hotly into his mouth as she writhed under him... The blood would fill him, warming his flesh so that it felt almost human once more. Only she would never feel it, because by then she'd be dead, her struggles ended.

He couldn't take that chance. She was too pure, too innocent for the likes of him. He shouldn't care that the thought of her going filled him with despair. In just this one short night, she'd gifted him with things he thought he'd never feel again.

There was something magic about her, about the way she looked and acted, the way she spoke and moved. And it was, perhaps, why he'd become so attached to her in so short a time, why she awoke in him desires he thought were long dead — why he wanted her so badly, when he knew it would be fatal for both of them.

Physically, she would die, he knew that to be true. But his death would be far worse, for it was only inside that he would die. He would exist, but he would not live. He would die with her.

How could he have come to such an impasse? Without her, he wasn't sure that he would live, and with her he would surely die. He wanted so much to touch her once more, to taste the sweetness of her lips against his, feel the warmth of her body penetrate the coldness of his.

He looked about suddenly. They were alone, her eyes still locked on his. Slowly, she slid off the stage to stand next to him, her arms reaching out to capture him.

He should run, get away. But before he could act, her arms were around him, the subtle warmth of her flesh stealing through his body. She looked up at him, her eyes at once tender and wise. His neck bowed, catching her lips with his.

A jolt of desire shook him to the core, but she did not deepen the kiss. It was he who parted her lips with his tongue, helpless to resist this new and sudden force compelling his body. The contact was sweet, her arms pulling him closer as her eyes flickered shut. His arms closed convulsively about her, wanting her closer, wanting to be inside her....

It was that last realization which shook him the most, and gave him the strength to end the kiss. "We shouldn't be doing this," he murmured unevenly, his eyes half-closed.

The look she gave him was frank, anticipation and arousal mingling in her eyes. "Try telling yourself that," she whispered breathlessly into the line of his jaw.

Her hands stroked the muscles of his back, kneading tenderly as she caressed his lips with hers once again. "Tell me you don't want this," she whispered softly, her lips barely brushing his. "Tell me."

"I can't." The unexpected answer broke him, and he clasped her to him, his mouth branding hers with a searing kiss. She moaned, her head falling to one side, exposing the pale whiteness of her neck. His mouth went suddenly dry, the hunger for her blood momentarily overwhelming him, and emptiness clawed the pit of his stomach.

He hadn't been able to enjoy cow's blood since he met her. Every night, he dreamed of her lying beneath him, his mouth wet and crimson with her blood. But she would move and smile at him, her arms opening, inviting him to feast again. That had drained his one meal of its pleasure, leaving him discontented.

And now she was here, her throat open to him. He could do it before she could stop him, feel her heart's blood hot and wet on his tongue. He shuddered, his gums aching as he tried desperately to hold his fangs in, his muscles tensing, bunching, waiting for the change.

He licked his lips. "I think we're moving a little too fast," he said, pushing his body away from hers and spinning so he wouldn't have to face her while he brought himself under control.

"You're probably right." Her voice was subdued, and then became flavored with humor. "There's

probably some conflict of interest, too. It wouldn't do for the detective to romance the chief suspect in a murder case."

He turned back to her. "You're *not* our chief suspect."

"I know better than that. I knew all three girls, and I was the last one to see Regina. I could have murdered Susie, and I wasn't in class when the killer got Barbara." She forced an element of cheer into her voice. "When can I expect to be arrested?"

"You aren't going to be arrested. You have no motive, for one thing. Why would you want to kill three of your friends?"

"I expect the D.A. will figure that one out. They'll come up with a suitable explanation."

"I don't suspect you. And since I'm the primary detective on this case, the D.A. will have to listen to me."

"So, I'd better keep you happy, huh?" She assumed a servile look. "What can I do for you, master?"

He had to laugh at her antics as she capered around him, brushing imaginary dust off his leather jacket. As he did so, she smiled to herself.

"I thought I'd never hear you laugh. Do you ration them out?"

"Yes, I'm only permitted one a day." He chuckled her gently under the chin. "But don't worry about it. I get unlimited free smiles."

She groaned, but he only grinned wider. Changing the subject, he continued, "You said earlier, 'what if the person is someone the police can't touch?' Who did you suspect?"

Her face colored, and she looked away for a few moments before looking back at him. "You're going to think I'm crazy...."

"No, I won't."

"Well..." she looked up slightly. "It may seem like I'm getting off the subject, but bear with me." He nodded, and she went on. "Do you believe in...supernatural things?"

"What kind of supernatural things?" He went absolutely still, but retained enough control that his voice was even.

"Oh." She laughed nervously. "Ghosts, werewolves, vampires — things like that."

"I'm not sure," he responded. "Do you believe in them?" He watched her closely, awaiting her answer.

"Well... I've always thought that it's like that line in Hamlet: 'There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. I mean, there could be, but I'm not sure." She went quiet for a second and then burst out, "It would be a much less interesting world if there *weren't* vampires, ghosts and things like that, and I like to believe that there are."

"I saw your bookshelves..." he ventured.

She smiled. "Yeah, I like to read about vampires, but only good ones." She laughed again. "And there are precious few of that kind with books about them."

"So, you don't think they are all evil?" He was secretly amused. How little she knew.

"No. I don't believe that they are evil because they are damned, or because they serve the devil, or because that's 'the way you become when you have to drink blood to survive. I believe what you are in life determines what you are in death, or un-death as the case may be.'

He looked in her eyes and saw how deeply she believed in what she was saying. Her eyes met his. "Why shouldn't there be good vampires?"

"No reason, I suppose. It's just that most of the ones you see are evil." He waited to see her reaction.

"But..." she stared at him fiercely and then shrugged, in a 'Why bother?' kind of gesture. "I would judge them on how they acted, not what they, uh, *drank*, for dinner. After all, a vampire doesn't have to kill people." She shrugged again. "Anyway, maybe it's because I'm in the play, but I thought...I thought a vampire might have killed Reg, Susie and Barb."

"You can't be serious," he responded by rote, his mind whirling as he tried to figure out her reasoning. Did she *know*, or even suspect?

"Well, you heard how they were killed, and they were missing about a pint of blood each. It just

got my mind thinking. I mean, I did warn you — about you thinking me crazy.”

“I’m afraid the newspapers have already come to the same conclusion,” he told her, remembering the “‘Vampire’ Killer” headlines he’d seen on the way to the station.

“Yeah, well, the police would find it a little hard to handcuff someone with the strength of ten men.” She went silent and smiled suddenly. “Someone who falls to dust in the sunlight would find it pretty hard to testify in court, wouldn’t you say?”

“You aren’t crazy,” he told her. “The person who did this is probably very seriously messed up, though.” His fingers caressed her hair, and then her cheek as she tilted her head back slightly.

“That was my second thought,” she said lazily. “An insane person.”

“That’s probably closer to the truth,” he acknowledged.

She lowered her head to face him fully once more. “Could you kiss me again?”

He found himself moving to do what she asked before gaining enough control to pull himself away. “If we kiss again, I might forget myself and do something I’ll regret,” he admitted.

Her eyes grew serious. “Well, I’d hate to make you do something you’d regret. Maybe another time, then?” Her voice was wistful.

“Yeah, maybe.” He started moving away, but her voice stopped him.

“I hope I didn’t act...badly. I hope you don’t think less of me for the way I acted.”

He turned halfway towards her. “You could never do anything that would make me not want you the way I do now. I just don’t want to hurt you.” His voice shook slightly, and her sad face softened into a smile. She came up to him and brushed a light kiss across his cheek before racing across to the stage stairs, and thence into the wings.

He smiled bitterly. As much as he wanted the words he had spoken to be lies, they were all too damnably true. And he didn’t know what to do about them or himself. If only he could touch her the way she deserved to be touched...but he could never do it, not he. Someone else deserved her love and affection. Not him. Never him.

\*

The next night, they were rehearsing yet again, but Nick couldn’t identify the scene. Lysana and the rest of the women watched from the wings as the men hacked apart boxes, spilling dirt onto the stage, then scattering handfuls of it in broad arcs.

Lysana glanced at him and smiled softly, nodding once and returning her gaze to the rest of the actors. She wore a blood-colored, velvet sack dress, whose extravagant lines hid her figure. Her hair had been loosely curled at the edges, but still tumbled freely down her back. Her skin looked lighter somehow, and her lips had been painted a bright, rich red, emphasizing both the darkness of her eyes and hair, and the lightness of her skin.

He waited until the scene ended before ascending the stage stairs. She came to him immediately. From this close, he could see the pearl necklace around her neck had a little golden bat pendant on it, and set in the center of it was a fake ruby. He quirked an eyebrow at it.

“Haven’t I seen that someplace before?”

“It’s a genuine movie prop from *Love at First Bite*. Miri got it from a friend of hers who worked on the movie. I think she wanted to wear it, but Selene thought it looked better on me.”

“By the way,” she looked slightly shamed-faced. “I’m sorry about last night. I didn’t mean to go as far as we...” She hesitated before going on. “I just haven’t felt this way before. With anyone.”

He looked down at the floor. “I feel that way myself,” he admitted.

She laughed suddenly. “Why do I feel like I’m in a romance novel?”

“I don’t mind,” he replied, relaxing. “As long as it’s a good one. Is it a good one?”

“A very good one,” she said, lights twinkling in her eyes.

He had to forcibly hold himself back from touching her, and he changed the subject. “I ran a background check on Brad,” he said. “When he was eighteen, he was accused of rape by his girlfriend. Her parents convinced her not to testify, and the charges were dropped. I tried to get in touch with her, but I got a distinctly chilly reception. As soon as she found out I was a policeman, she clammed up.”

"Maybe I could go talk to her," Lysana said. "It helps to have a woman discuss it, and if it is the police she's afraid of, well, I'm hardly the police."

"I don't think you should. You wouldn't even know what to ask her."

"If I can convince her to talk to you, that won't be a problem," she replied. "I want to get to the bottom of this, Detective Knight, and if Brad is guilty, he will pay for what he's done." Seeing his look, she quickly added, "in jail."

He sighed. As much as he wanted to deny her request, he couldn't. She did have a way with people. Witness all her friends and acquaintances. And if she could convince the Andrews girl to talk, it would cut down on his work. "All right," he finally said. "Just don't browbeat her."

"Oh, please," she said distastefully. "I'm much more subtle than *that*."

He laughed, and she smiled. "I wouldn't put it past Brad, you know." He tensed, but she didn't sound angry or vindictive, merely mournful. "He can't take 'no' for an answer. Sometimes, it can be charming, but mostly it's a pain in the buns." Her voice dropped. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think he'd kill somebody."

"I thought you were the one who wanted to string him up by his heels over a slow fire," he said.

"No, I never wanted revenge, merely justice. As I'm sure you well know, it isn't the same thing." She was quiet for a moment. "I'm not angry, although I was at first. I just feel so sad. I'll never see my friends again."

He held his tongue, knowing there was nothing he could say to ease her pain. How could he hope to say anything, when even he knew of no way to diminish the pain of losing someone you loved?

Lysana sighed deeply and smiled with an effort. "I shouldn't dump my problems on you." She turned away. "Please excuse me," she murmured. "I have a scene coming up soon." And she fled.

Nick frowned, but made no move to stop her. He had to talk to Brad, who was just finishing a scene with Vickie. Brad forced Vickie's mouth to his chest, where she, sobbing, made loud sucking and slurping noises. Brad threw his head back, face exultant. Soon, the men burst in, and Vickie pulled away, her lips and chin smeared red.

*"Blood," his mind screamed, "blood!"*

"*Mein Gott!*" Robin exclaimed. "The Creature has forced her to drink its blood. She is his now!"

*LaCroix smiled. "She is not dead. She is merely...sleeping."*

Brad laughed and leapt to the edge of the stage, and then he vanished into the wings. Vickie broke down in tears.

*"How does it feel to be an immortal, Jean-Pierre?"*

Snarling under his breath, Nick went to find Brad.

Brad was in the back, wiping the fake blood from his chest. Concentrating slightly so that he could be seen in all the mirrors, Nick approached him.

"What do you want?" Brad asked, concentrating on dabbling away the smears.

"I did a background check on you, Brad."

"Oh?" His voice was deliberately casual, and Nick could see him turn pale under his makeup.

Nick met his eyes in the mirror. "I'm sure you know what we found. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Brad flushed. "The whole thing was a crock. Tiana went to bed with me, and we had an argument afterwards. The next thing I know, she's saying I raped her."

"Did you?"

"No!" The word burst from his lips. "She said she liked it a little rough. She enjoyed every minute of the ride I gave her. I told her parents what really happened, and they convinced her to drop the whole thing."

"There had to be more to it than that," Nick said.

"She was the class whore, if that's what you mean. Heck, half the guys I knew had gone to bed with her at one time or another."

"So you did, too?"

Brad's face turned beet-red. "I was horny and she was willing. I wasn't proud, but I woulda made it with anything that night."

"Or forced yourself on her if she didn't want to?"

Brad exploded. He leapt to his feet and faced Nick. "Why are you persecuting me?" he asked. "She dropped the charges. It was *never proven!*"

"That isn't the same thing as saying you didn't do it," Nick told him, and had the pleasure of watching Brad deflate.

"She said she was pregnant and that I was the father. But I don't know who the father really was."

"How could she claim you were the father when you hadn't gone out with her before?" Nick asked. "If she knew she was pregnant, she had to be well along."

Brad flushed deeper. "I'd gone out with her before," he admitted.

"How many times?"

"It was an on-again, off-again kind of thing," Brad said.

"How many times did you go to bed with her?" This from Schanke, who now stood by the makeup room door, along with Lysana.

"How long have you been standing there?" Brad asked.

"Long enough." Lysana nodded an agreement to Schanke's statement, and there were murmurs of assent from behind her.

"Is everybody out there?" Brad asked, suddenly subdued.

Lysana took a quick look behind her, and spread her hands. "Pretty much. You weren't exactly being quiet, you know."

Brad let out a soft moan, his look becoming one of utter despair. He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. "So how many times did you go to bed with this girl, anyway?" Schanke prodded.

"Five or six times," Brad said, now docile.

"And did Barbara tell you that *you* were the father of her child, too?" Nick asked.

"No." Then, almost immediately, he blurted out, "She was pregnant?" It was, perhaps, Nick thought, the most truthful thing he'd said all night.

Nick nodded, and Brad looked disgusted. "I asked her if she was on the pill, and she said, 'Yeah'. I should have guessed she was lying. Manipulative bitch." He looked at his hands. "I didn't kill any of those girls, Detectives. It's true I asked to escort Barbara home, but that was because I was worried. With all the deaths that had taken place, I was worried that the killer might try to get her if she was alone. I wanted to protect her, not kill her." He collapsed into a chair.

"Where were you the nights the first two girls were killed?" Schanke asked.

"Here rehearsing," Brad replied. "Anyone can tell you that. I'm in a lot of scenes, and so I have to be here almost constantly." His voice was a near-monotone, and he sat with his shoulders slumped.

"And where were you when Barbara died?" Nick asked.

Brad sighed deeply. "I left part of my costume in my room, so I decided to walk part of the way with her, even if she wouldn't let me escort her. I left her by the Student Union. On the way to my room, I met a friend of mine and asked him to look in on her, to make sure she got home safe. Then, I went to my room and came directly back here."

"What is your friend's name?" Schanke asked, scribbling furiously.

"Kevin Allman."

"All right," Nick said. "Once we've checked your story, we'll be in touch. Until then, I wouldn't make any plans to go anywhere."

Brad nodded and put his head in his hands. Schanke flipped his notebook shut, and the crowd began to disperse. Lysana looked hesitantly at the two detectives. "I hate to bother you..." she began.

"You're not bothering us," Nick replied.

She breathed out deeply. "The lockers have been broken into again."

"I thought everyone put new locks on," Nick said.

She nodded. "Someone cut them off."

\*

The locker room looked no different than the last time Nick had seen it. There was a pair of old

sneakers by the door, and costumes hung on a rack against one wall.

The rest of the area was clean and neat, including the changing rooms. But Lysana was right. The key and combination locks on the lockers had all been cut, probably with bolt cutters. They had been left hanging on the lockers, and then turned so that it looked like nothing had changed.

"What happened? How did you notice this?" Schanke asked, toying with one of the cut locks.

"I came in to use the bathroom, and I saw that the lock on my locker had been turned around. I checked it, and noticed it was cut. Only...all the others were like that, too."

"Did you check to see if anything was missing?" Nick asked.

"No, not yet. I thought I'd wait until I told you about the locker," she replied.

She pulled the lock off and unlocked the key lock in the locker door. Opening the door, she saw that her clothes had been stuffed in willy-nilly. She pulled them out slowly, a look of pain on her expressive face. She carefully folded her clothes, and then patted them slowly, her look stricken. She shook out her blouse, but obviously, whatever she was looking for wasn't there.

"I...had... a brooch," she said softly, "of a woman with outstretched arms on a wreath of vines." She paused. "My grandmother gave it to me before she died, and I had it pinned to my blouse." She paused again, and added as an obvious afterthought. "It was silver."

"You said that things had been stolen before. What else?" Nick pressed.

"Regina had a few rings stolen—costume jewelry. Susie's professional modeling portfolio went missing, too." Lysana smiled weakly. "Boy, did she spit blood over that one. Not that I blame her; she said it would cost her at least a thousand dollars to replace, if she could. Barb lost a framed photo of herself with her *idol*, Michael Crawford."

"Are you missing anything else?" Schanke asked. "Besides the brooch?"

"Including my peace of mind?" she asked with a weak grin. "I'll check."

She went through the rest of her things and frowned once more as she went through her wallet. "Money?" Schanke asked.

"No." She sounded puzzled. "My high-school graduation picture."

Schanke and Nick exchanged glances. "Was Regina missing any photos?" Nick asked.

"She didn't tell me if she was," Lysana replied, and then paused. "Do you think I'm next on this guy's list?"

"Well, it does seem awfully coincidental," Schanke said. "Was anybody else missing anything?"

"Robin had a Yankees jacket go missing," she replied. "Three days later, it just reappeared." She frowned. "Nobody else."

"And whose stuff was the first to turn up missing?" Schanke asked.

"Robin's." She turned pale suddenly. "Then Reg, then Susie, then Barb." She swallowed noisily. "The same order in which they were killed. Oh, god," she put her hand to her mouth. "I am next."

"Do you want protection?" Schanke asked.

"That'd be a little ridiculous," she replied airily. "I have a brown belt in T'ai Ch'i, and I have plenty of friends, most of whom want to pound this guy into the next century. I'll be fine."

"From what we suspect, it's someone they all knew," Nick told her. "Don't trust anybody!"

"Not even you?" she asked.

He glared at her. "This isn't funny."

"I know it isn't. But I'll get hysterics if I think about it for too long, or too seriously." She went quiet. "I'm not just frightened. I'm terrified. So, yes, I want protection."

Her heartbeat was like the steady throb of drums in Nick's ears, but it was beating way too fast, and her skin had a faint, waxy pallor. Nick touched her arm gently. "Nothing is going to happen to you. I'll see to that."

She bestowed on him a warm look. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll be safe with you looking after me."

"Well, only during the night," he began, and Schanke broke in.

"He can't ruin his complexion with the sun," he told Lysana. "I'll guard you during the day. He," he gestured at Nick with his thumb, "is too perfect to mingle with us *day* people."

Nick gave Schanke a threatening look, while Lysana considered Nick thoughtfully, a smile creeping slowly across her face.

At last, she shrugged. "It makes no difference to me. I'm out more at night than during the day anyway." She transferred her gaze to Nick. "You have your work cut out for you." A sudden frown formed. "You're not going to follow me *everywhere*, are you?"

Nick grinned. "No, not *everywhere*," he said, and watched her relax. "But we'll become very familiar faces to you and your friends."

"You're pretty familiar already," she replied. She glanced back over her shoulder. "My scene should be starting soon." She smiled at both of them and walked out. Nick followed her.

Schanke shook his head. "I don't know how he does it." He fell silent for a few moments and then shrugged. "Must be the jacket," he consoled himself.

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"I really felt sorry for John," Nick told her later.

"Sorry? In what way?"

"Even I would have had a hard time resisting you. Once you turned on the charm, he was in the palm of your hand."

"Thank you." She rubbed absently on the sleeve of her T-shirt. "I hope you didn't mind that I decided to stay up tonight." She smiled weakly. "I don't think I could sleep right now."

"Well," he replied, "I do think you should be getting more sleep. It's not good to go without sleep for so long. But I don't mind spending time with you."

"That's good, because if you weren't here, I'd be in bed, brooding and worrying." She blushed. "I don't think I've ever been so scared in all my life!" She hugged herself tightly, and Nick reluctantly put his arms around her, feeling the warmth of her skin seep gradually into his.

"Don't be scared. I'm here to protect you." He squeezed her gently, and she laid her cheek on his shoulder.

"My mind knows that, but I'm afraid my body doesn't care. It's scared anyway." She turned halfway towards him and snuggled against him, her arms linking around his waist. The scent of her overwhelmed him, and he hugged her tighter, wishing she would kiss him.

In that moment, he was lost, as he'd known he would be from the time he'd first reached out and touched her. He felt her begin stroking his stomach through his shirt. The tips of her fingers glided lightly, leaving him not so much with the sensation of being touched but more a heightened awareness of his skin.

She tilted her head up to meet his gaze. "I feel better al..." she began, but Nick covered her lips with his, blotting out the rest of her words. His lips devoured hers, teasing and caressing, until her lips opened to his.

"*I can't be doing this*," he thought to himself. "*She'll die if I....*" But she brought her hand up and caressed his face, moving down to his chest, and all coherent thought flew out the window. He tried to pull himself away, but he realized he didn't want to and gave up trying, too lost in the feel of her body beneath him to think.

She moaned softly as his hands touched her breasts. He shifted his body slightly, bringing his long legs up onto the couch. She stretched out next to him and he embraced her once more, only breaking away to let her breathe. But as he did so, he continued to kiss her face, neck and shoulders.

"The door is unlocked," she reminded him softly, her eyes closed.

"I'll lock it," he told her.

"We're in the storeroom with the props from the play," she said. "Someone might need something."

"They all went home," he said, kissing her lips once again and lingering there until she moaned once more, "hours ago. We're alone."

She chuckled softly as he got up to lock the door. "I think I'll prefer your method of protecting me to your partner's."

"I already do." He finished locking the door, and came back over to the couch. She opened her eyes at his approach, and propped herself up on one elbow.

"Did I ever tell you how handsome you are?" she said.

"No," he replied, feeling uncomfortable. He wasn't used to compliments.

"Well, you are." She stopped, and then continued. "I'm sorry if it makes you embarrassed. I've always been very...frank." She blushed.

"Give me some time to get used to it. I can get used to everything, given time." He tried to smile, but a tiny voice inside him kept whispering, "*How much time?*"

She smiled. "Yes, but how much time, hmm?" She touched his hand gently. "Don't feel you have to change on my account. I like you just the way you are." She stood up and wrapped her arms around him once again. Their lips met, and their bodies ground together, sending shocks of pleasure through him. He trailed kisses down her neck and then under her ear, tracing the delicate veins with his tongue, feeling the blood pulse under his lips.

He brushed back a silky tendril of hair, sucking gently on the skin directly under her ear. She moaned and clutched him tighter, rubbing her face against his leather jacket.

The scent of her was strong around him, and suddenly, he was fighting the urge to take her, to take a taste, just a taste, of her blood. His fangs burst through his gums, and he tried to pull away, but Lysana, her eyes closed, was pulling his head closer, encouraging him to kiss her again.

There was a knock at the door.

Lysana jumped, her face turning bright red. She quickly straightened her mussed clothes, ran a hand through her hair, and called out sweetly, "Yes?", all at the same time.

"It's me," Schanke said.

Lysana frowned. "Excellent timing," she muttered to Nick.

He nodded, agreeing, but not in the sarcastic manner that she had obviously meant the comment.

Suddenly, a mischievous smile brightened her face. "How do I know you are who you say you are?" she asked. She grinned at Nick, and it took an effort to maintain a straight face until his fangs had retracted once more.

"What?!"

Lysana put her hand over her mouth and doubled over, her sides heaving as she struggled to contain her laughter. "How do I know you're Detective Schanke?" she called out merrily.

There was dead silence from the other side. "You know who I am, let me in," Schanke called out.

"I don't know," she replied. "You do sound like him.... Can I see some identification?"

There was a disgusted noise from Nick's partner. "How are you going to see it if you won't open the door?" Schanke replied at last, sounding slightly smug.

"Then I guess I won't be able to let you in after all," she replied brightly. "Have a good day, whoever you are."

Schanke cursed, and then pounded on the door. "Let me in!"

Lysana raised her hands in mock surrender. "All right, all right. I guess you are Detective Schanke. Nobody else could yell like that." She went to the door and unlocked it. She peered out and smiled. "I'll be out in a minute," she promised.

She turned back to Nick and shut the door. "Thank you for staying up with me," she said, kissing him lightly. "And everything else. I'll see you tonight."

"I was just doing my job," he responded.

"I'd like to see your job description sometime," she replied with a smile.

She smiled at him once again and turned away, her body brushing against his so lightly he knew it was accidental. Her scent wafted back to him on the change in air pressure as she opened the door and let herself out.

He stifled a groan. Her scent, her damnable scent that was so delicious it made the gums over his fangs ache for the wanting of her. To stroke her skin, make her slick with want for him... He stumbled to the door and locked it as his fangs burst free and the muscles under his face shifted into a new formation. The world became more alive to him as his vampire senses kicked into higher gear. There were no senses as strong as those of a hunting vampire....

He could sense her close, so very close. Even her scent here, in the room, was enough to test his tenuous self-control. And, nearby, the sound of her heartbeat, as clear to him and as different from all the rest as the voice of a favored lover, calling... calling.

He started for the door, but the memory of her sweet, gentle face smiling up at him broke through the seductive call of her heartbeat, and he sank to the floor of the storeroom, sliding his back down the wall, pounding the floor with his fists until his self-control took over once again. The tiles were powder under his fingers as he raised his hands, but the cuts were already healing and in seconds there was no sign to show they had ever been there. A bitter, self-mocking grin pulled at his features. No, vampires were never hurt for long.

Dusting off his hands, he pulled himself up and unlocked the door, his gums healing instantly as the fangs retracted. His face resumed its normal appearance as he opened the door and walked out. By the time he was halfway down the hall, he'd gotten back enough of his equilibrium to whistle.

If only he didn't want her so much.

Brunetti called Nick into his office the minute he walked in the squad room. "I want to know what's been happening with this 'campus killer' case," he demanded.

"I'm working on it," Nick replied.

"Oh yeah? You just tell that to the three sets of parents I've got breathing down my back," Brunetti shot back. "Not to mention the dean *and* the mayor."

"We've got a suspect," Nick replied cautiously. "But we don't have enough evidence to arrest him."

"Then get it," the captain demanded, giving Nick a hard look. "You can go," he said at last, settling behind his desk and shuffling through the paperwork stacked on it.

Nick stifled the urge to slam the door, and instead let himself out quietly, closing the door behind him.

"Hey, Knight," Jimenez called. "There's a lady on line three for you."

"Thanks," Nick replied with a nod, changing direction for his desk. "Knight," he said into the receiver.

"It's me." Lysana's voice had a smoky quality over the phone, and she sounded upset.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she replied with a sigh. "I'm with Tiana Andrews. She's agreed to talk, under one condition."

"And that is?" he asked, toying with a pen.

"She wants me to be there." She sighed again.

"You don't sound well. What's the matter?" he asked, not quite keeping the concern out of his voice.

"It's not a pretty story," she replied. "I'll be waiting for you."

With a click, the line went dead. Nick stared at the receiver in his hand before replacing it in its cradle and sprinting for the door.

The Andrews' house was located high in the hills, and Nick whistled as he turned onto the block where she lived. There was no doubt about it, this girl was *rich*. The size of her house was truly awesome. Nick had seen smaller apartment buildings.

The circular drive was paved with crushed marble, and Nick got a good look at the well-manicured grounds as he pulled up to the front door. He parked by the other two vehicles, a Lamborghini Countach and a tatty, but still respectable Ford van,

A blonde teenage boy wearing a walkman answered the door. He glanced out at the driveway, and his eyes popped. "Is that your car?" he asked, glancing at Nick.

Nick grinned and nodded.

"How much do you want for it?" the kid asked, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a checkbook and pen.

"It's not for sale," Nick told him.

"Are you sure?" the kid said. "I could make you a very competitive offer...."

"I'm sure," Nick replied. Then, "I'm here to see Tiana Andrews."

The kid took one last look at the car before replying. "You must be the detective. She's waiting for you in the sitting room."

The young boy led him through the house, to where Lysana and a tall, thin blonde in an oversized sweater and jhodpur pants were chatting over sodas. "Wow, sis!" the boy exclaimed. "You should see his car!"

The blonde nudged Lysana. "My brother is so car-crazy." She returned her gaze to her brother. "That's nice, Jimmy. Now, could you leave us alone for a while?"

He nodded. "I'll be out by the tennis court."

Lysana waited until the boy was gone, and then glanced up at Nick. "Detective Knight, this is Tiana Andrews." She returned her gaze to the blonde. "Tiana, this is the man I was telling you about."

Tiana looked him over and blushed. "I'm sorry about what I said on the phone, but it brought back so many memories, none of them pleasant." She was quiet for a moment. "I didn't want to have to think about it ever again." She pulled self-consciously at the sweater she was wearing. "Will you excuse me for a minute?"

"Sure," Nick replied.

She stood, and then glanced at him uncertainly. "Please, have a seat. Do you want anything to drink?"

"No, thank you."

She nodded and went out.

Nick seated himself in a reproduction Louis XV chair and glanced over at Lysana. "I see you didn't bring Schanke with you."

"No, he didn't go with the decor, Detective Knight," she said frostily.

"Call me Nick, please," he said, raising his hands in mock surrender.

"All right," she said, her voice warming. "I would have screamed if I had to put up with him much longer, so I ditched him and came here."

"I take it you and he didn't get along?"

"If someone tells me a gorilla escaped from the zoo, I'll tell them he's working for the police department," she quipped, a twinkle in her eye. "Seriously though, can you *believe* this place?" She gestured around the room. "The dining room alone was bigger than the school cafeteria." She shook her head. "I feel very out of place."

"When I drove up, her brother offered to buy my car on the spot," he confided.

"I can't say the same about my van," she replied with a grin. "I think he felt sorry for me."

He laughed, and she began to chuckle. "Well, you two sound like you're having a good time," Tiana said as she came back in, bearing another two sodas. She sat down and drew her legs up under her on the sofa.

"We were just discussing your house," Lysana replied.

Tiana smiled. "We'll deserve our own zip code soon," she said with a grin. Then, her grin faltered. "But this isn't the reason why you came to talk to me, right?" She sighed. "I wanted to forget so much, but I can't help remembering."

Lysana reached over and squeezed her hand. Tiana returned it with a warm look of gratitude.

"Brad and I had been going steady for about three months," she said, her eyes fixed on one point as she remembered. "He kept breaking our relationship off to go out with other girls, but he returned to me when he got tired of them."

"I guess I should have broken it off with him, but I loved him too much to do that, even when he was going out with other girls. I was such a doormat." She shrugged helplessly and went on. "Before he would go steady with me, he told me that unless I went to bed with him, he'd leave me for someone who was more 'willing'. So, I did. I was so naive, I didn't even use any protection. How's that for stupid?" she said bitterly.

"And then, I found out I was pregnant. I hoped it would go away, so I didn't have to deal with it, but it didn't, so I waited until one of our dates to tell him."

She laughed shortly. "We went up into the mountains, by the Hollywood sign, so we could be alone. Boy, was he livid. He accused me of whoring around, of getting pregnant to trap him into marriage.... He just wouldn't stop yelling at me." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He grabbed me, and he started ripping my clothes off. He kept telling me that no one would hear me, that nobody would help

me." Tears poured openly down her face, and she trailed off into sobs of anguish. Lysana extended her hand, and Tiana grabbed it so tightly that Nick saw her wince.

She sobbed into Lysana's jacket, while Lysana stroked her hair, murmuring words of comfort. Finally, she was ready to continue, and her voice was barely above a whisper.

"I screamed and screamed, and it hurt so bad I thought I'd die. I *wanted* to die. And he was right. Nobody heard, nobody saw, nobody came." She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "Afterwards, he told me that I'd better not say anything, or he wouldn't go out with me any more." She forced herself to laugh. "As if I'd still *want* to go out with him after what he'd done to me."

She fell silent for a few moments, wiping her eyes against a fresh spurt of tears. "When I got home, I told Mom and Dad what happened and said I wanted to go to the police. They backed me up, but when Brad found out, he came right over to try to get me to change my mind. I didn't want to see him, so he told my parents that I was the whore of the school, and that if I continued to press charges, he'd bring on twenty guys who'd say they slept with me."

She hugged herself tightly. "He said he'd drag my name through the dirt so badly that no one would ever want to know me again." She stared at Nick, her expression beseeching. "My parents didn't want me to go through something like that, so they persuaded me to drop the charges. At the time, I agreed with them. Now..." she dropped her eyes, "I'm not so sure."

She gave a pained sigh. "The worst part was when I went to the police station to drop the charges. The officer in charge said he hated it when women got mad at their boyfriends and cried 'rape', then dropped the charges when they made up." She frowned. "That *really* made me burn."

"I don't blame you," Lysana said in the silence that followed. "That would have toasted me, too."

Tiana smiled weakly at her, then returned her gaze to Nick. "There isn't much else to say. Lysana told me about the murders, and I realized that if Brad was involved, it was my duty to help you. No, not duty — pleasure."

"What happened after you dropped the charges?" Nick asked sympathetically.

Tiana laughed bitterly. "He tried to ruin my reputation around the school, but my friends were on my side, so nobody believed what he said. Then I told everybody what really happened, and he had the nerve to tell me to stop spreading my *lies*. I told him, 'We all know who the real liar is here, don't we, Brad?'. I thought he was going to hit me, but he walked away. He changed schools, and I never saw him again. Not that I wanted to, of course," she added. "And I tried to forget him. God, how I tried. Maybe I'll sleep better now that I've told you, but I doubt it."

Nick hesitated, then asked, "Do you think he's capable of murder?"

Tiana thought for a few moments, then shrugged. "I'm not sure. Two things I do know," her voice became cold with anger, "he likes to lie, and his reputation means everything to him." She gave a short bark of laughter. "That's what he hated the most. I was destroying his *reputation*. Isn't that a crock?" She smiled thinly. "Tell him you talked to me. I'm sure you'll find the effects most...salutary."

There was nothing much left to say, and he stood. "Thank you, Miss Andrews. I'm sure your information will be a great help to us."

He gestured to Lysana, but she shook her head. "You go on, Nick," she said, tasting his name. "I'll be along in a little while."

"But..." he began, and she cut him off.

"Miri is going to walk me from the parking lot to the theater. We'll watch each other." She smiled. "We'll — I'll — be fine."

"All right," he said, grudgingly, unwilling to leave her alone. "I'll meet you at the theater."

"Yes," she agreed. "At the theater." She turned to Tiana, who gave her a grateful, if waterlogged, smile.

He showed himself out and drove back to the campus in silence, intending to have a *very* long talk with Brad.

He cornered Lysana's friend, Miri, at the theater. She studied him for a few minutes and nodded in approval. "Lysana deserves someone like you," she finally told him.

Nobody deserved someone like him, but he wasn't about to tell her that. Instead, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Lysana is the nicest person I've ever met, period. Her last boyfriend talked a good game, but he was really a creep, and he didn't deserve her for one minute. But," she smiled at him, "you're a cop. I'd like to think you'd be thrown out of your job if you were a hopeless jerk. Cops are dependable." She smiled slowly. "I figure you'll do."

"Thanks," he said, feeling confused. "But what makes you think she and I are interested in each other, anyway?"

"Lysana came in as happy as a lark, for the first time since Reg died. She told me you stayed up with her because she couldn't sleep. Not only that, she had that well-kissed look." She laughed. "I should know. I've had it myself more than a few times. Oh, and in case you're wondering, I'm not jealous. I still think you're the most gorgeous hunk I've ever laid my eyes on. She just deserves you more than I do."

Then, she lost her grin and her eyes narrowed. "By the way, if you're thinking of tossing her over the minute they find this guy, you've got another think coming. I don't want to see her hurt. If you do, I'll rip your lips off and feed them to you an inch at a time." She looked him over, and when she was satisfied she'd made her point, she went on. "Is there anything I can help you with today, detective?"

He found her sense of honor amusing, but he knew *she* wouldn't. "Have you seen Brad?"

She glanced back over her shoulder. "He *was* here earlier, but I haven't seen him since Therese and Jason started arguing over some missing props." She hesitated and then continued. "Jason has a way of picking up things that aren't his."

"Would he break into things...like lockers, perhaps?"

Miri shook her head. "He's like a crow. He picks up shiny things that are lying out in the open. He's never broken into anything. It's just... opportunity kleptomania. If things aren't out in the open, it's not a temptation, and he doesn't take them. Why?"

"Just wondering if he was responsible for the locker break-ins," Nick said.

"He'd never do anything like that," she told him. "I went out with him for a while, I should know."

Nick raised an eyebrow at her, and she elaborated, "He's a cute guy. What can I say?" She grinned self-deprecatingly and spread her hands. "I never could control myself around cute men."

'Tell me about it,' Nick thought to himself. He thanked her and asked several others in the theater, but no one remembered having seen Brad recently. Vickie said she saw him having an argument "with one of the stagehands. I'm not sure which one. I don't know all of them, nor would I want to. Lysana would know, but she wasn't there...."

Nick broke into the flow of her words. "Could you tell me which one if they were here in front of you?"

"No, I'm... I wasn't looking at the guy's face," she said earnestly. "I really wasn't paying attention. I didn't think it would be important."

Nick allowed himself a reassuring smile to relax her, then asked, "You said you heard them arguing. What were they arguing about?"

Vickie smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that, either. All I heard was Brad saying, 'I have a bone to pick with you,' in a real angry voice. The other guy said 'Not here.' and they walked away. I was being called to rehearse, so that's all I heard."

Nick nodded at her. "Thank you for the information, Miss Neuworth." He turned to go, and then turned one of his blinding smiles on her. "If you can remember anything, don't hesitate to call me."

She smiled. "I'll remember that." She shook her head. "Too bad you're taken."

His burst of surprise was not lost on her, and she grinned openly. "News travels fast, especially when Miri Hunter is involved." She pulled at a curl of red hair, winding it around her finger. "You've had half the women here sighing after you." She released the curl, watching it bounce before continuing. "Lysana is lucky."

"No," he told her honestly. "I'm the lucky one." And he suddenly wished Lysana was here with him now, so he could tell her what he was, hoping she wouldn't reject him out of hand. That she wouldn't care what he was.

Then he cursed himself for being a fool. Of course she would hate him. After all, what was he but a monster in human guise? A monster who desperately wished to be human, but a monster

nonetheless. Not until he was human could he hope to find someone to love him. Lysana wasn't in love with *him*, she was in love with the false face he wore every day. No one could ever love him for what he really was. No one. Ever.

He questioned the stagehands next, but no one admitted talking with Brad. Schanke joined him as he finished. "Had any luck finding that kid Kevin that Brad was talking about?" Schanke asked.

"No, I did talk with his ex-girlfriend though."

"I though she gave you the cold shoulder. What'd you do, offer to show her your chest?"

Nick didn't dignify that with a reply. "Lysana talked her into it."

Schanke looked embarrassed. "She gave me the slip earlier. Just got in her car and drove off. I tell you, Knight, her and her giggly friends are giving me heartburn." He mopped his balding forehead.

Nick ignored him. "Did you get Brad's dorm room number?"

Schanke checked his notebook. "Schurman House, Room 2018. Why?"

"He hasn't been here in a few hours. Let's go."

Nick filled Schanke in as they walked to the dorm. It was a converted apartment house, and Brad's room was on the very top floor. The vintage elevator creaked and groaned as it made its way to the top.

"This thing is safe, isn't it?" Schanke commented anxiously to Nick. "I mean, they wouldn't let people ride it if it wasn't safe, right?"

"Oh, I don't know," Nick said, hiding his grin. "Sometimes these old elevator cables go with no warning at all. Fine one minute, and the next...snap!" He watched Schanke blanch and glance upward nervously, clutching the handrails for dear life.

At last, they reached the top, and Schanke dashed from the car as if it might drop at any second. Nick followed more slowly, grinning at his partner's back.

The hall rocked with heavy-metal music played at barely-tolerable levels, and the decorations were mostly from *Playboy* and *Oui*. A few posters glorified thrash metal bands, and the walls were painted black and red, with tiny pitchfork wielding devils cavorting amidst the flames of hell.

The door to 2018 was covered with pictures of half-naked women, and Schanke stopped to look before knocking. At last, he raised his beefy hand and rapped loudly.

There was no answer from the room. Schanke knocked again, and when there was no response this time, tried the knob. It gave way easily, but the door only opened a few inches before bumping into something.

Schanke put his shoulder to the door, forcing it back. There was a scraping noise, and they slipped into the room.

Nick's throat went dry as he looked up. "Ah, shit!" he muttered, and heard Schanke curse reverently in Polish.

It was Brad, hanging from an overhead pipe, his face reddened and distorted and tongue protruding, while his body twisted slowly below the noose. They stared at the body, spellbound, until a shriek behind them shattered their attention.

A young girl, her eyes wide and dilated with fear and shock, stuffed her hands into her mouth, her eyes fixed on the awful sight of Brad's body hanging like a side of beef.

Nick stepped in front of her, breaking her line of sight to the body, and she crumpled to the floor. But now her scream had brought all the occupants of the floor piling out to see what was the matter. They stopped as they caught sight of the body, and Nick motioned to Schanke to get going, which is exactly what Schanke did.

A chorus of whispers filled the hall and one man helped the girl to her feet, while another darted back into his room. The music died in mid-note. "Go back to your rooms," Nick told them. "We'll need to ask you some questions shortly."

Some of them did as he asked, but the rest nudged and whispered amongst themselves as Nick scanned the room.

A battered fiberglass chair lay on its side underneath the body, and there was a piece of paper held down by a hunting knife on the desk. Posters of Cindy Crawford and Slayer vied for space on the walls, and a brass picture frame held a slashed photo.

Careful not to touch or disturb anything, Nick made his way to the desk where the note was. The

computer-printed message read, "I know the police are closing in on me, and I always promised myself I would never be taken alive. So this note is to confirm my deeds. I killed Regina Hill, Susannah Martin and Barbara Norwick. At least now I know I'll be famous. Brad Temple." At the bottom was another line, written almost as an afterthought. "I raped Tiana Andrews, too, and I never regretted it. I'm glad they're dead."

Nick exhaled the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. It seemed a little too neat, but Brad just might have been the type to go through with something like this.

He glanced around and saw an IBM clone with a laser printer on a small table at the foot of the bunk bed. He touched the casing lightly with the back of his hand. Still warm.

Turning around, he studied the braided rope Brad was hanging from. It was telephone wire, braided for more strength. The end had been tied to an old pipe sticking out from the base of the far wall, and was hung over another metal pipe running across the ceiling. It was tied into a slipknot around Brad's neck. He'd apparently stood on the chair and then stepped off, kicking the chair over as he struggled.

Or perhaps not. If Brad had truly wanted to die, he might have kicked the chair over deliberately. It was certainly a slow death; there wasn't enough room to break his spine, like when a criminal was executed by hanging, so he had slowly choked to death.

And he had chosen his death site well. From where he was hanging, there was nothing to hold on to, no way to go back if he changed his mind. Just a slow, painful death.

Nick shook his head and turned back towards the doorway. At least Lysana was out of danger now. She would be safe. It made him happy, but it also made him feel lonely. He couldn't continue seeing her now. The dream had been good while it lasted, but what right had he to dream? Dreams were for real people, not monsters. He had to say good-bye to her. She deserved better than him. It was never meant to be.

A pain constricted in his chest as he thought of never seeing her again, never touching the peach satin of her skin, never kissing those wide lips that smiled and laughed so easily.

The wide golden eyes in his memory went wide with pain and shock, but he shook the image away before the tears glistening at the corners could fall. It had been too real, and the pain was tearing him to bits inside.

Then Schanke arrived with the paramedics and a pair of uniformed officers. One of the paramedics whistled at the sight of the body, and the uniforms, after photographing the room and examining the body for evidence, let them cut him down and bear the body away, leaving the rope to be stuffed into an evidence bag.

Nick and Schanke helped collect the evidence, including the knife, the note, the computer, and the printer that presumably printed the note.

By this time, a large crowd had gathered out in the hall, leaving the uniforms to squeeze through on their way to the room. He noticed most of the people from the play there, and all too soon Lysana and Miri arrived.

Someone whispered something to Lysana, and she went very pale, a horrified look blossoming on her face. She leaned against the wall, tears running down her cheeks as Miri rubbed her arm and tried to comfort her.

"I never thought he would do something like this," she told Miri.

"He was scum," Miri replied. "Don't tell me you actually feel *sorry* for him."

"He committed suicide," Lysana shot back. "He still had a conscience." She shook her head. "I'm afraid I drove him to it, Miri. We were all treating him like a pariah, even me."

"You can't blame yourself for his death. You can't make someone into something they're not. Don't make Brad into something he wasn't: a nice guy."

"I thought he was my friend, for a while," Lysana said, wiping her tears away with the tail of her shirt.

"Lysana, you're the nicest person I know, but you trust too easily."

Nick made an effort to ignore them, but he could still hear them over the murmur of the crowd. Miri was right. Lysana *was* too trusting. She trusted him, didn't she?

But it was that trust which made her so attractive. She'd felt so wonderful in his arms, so soft,

so warm, and the memory of her scent alone was enough to make his fangs ache. He wanted her so very badly, and yet he knew it must not be.

She made him forget that he could kill her until it was far too late, and he was holding her in his arms. And he would know he must push her away, but her body sapped his willpower. Last night, he would have killed her if Schanke hadn't knocked on the door. Even after she was gone, he'd nearly forgotten himself and stalked her anyway, Schanke or no. He couldn't let himself be alone with her any longer. He had to forget her *now*, for her sake — and his own sanity.

Suddenly, Miri glanced in his direction. "You've got it bad for him, don't you?" she asked Lysana, indicating him with a jerk of her head.

Lysana didn't look, but smiled anyway. "Yeah," she said. "I've never felt this way before with anybody, you know? With other guys, it was nice, but now it's..." She searched for the words. "It's like sticking your wet finger in a wall socket. When I'm around him, I forget who I am. One minute, I'm sane, sensible Lysana, and the next, I'm some sex-crazed seductress doing things I blush just *thinking* about."

Miri grinned. "Sounds like love to me."

"I guess it does," Lysana replied, answering with a grin of her own.

"By the way, I laid down the law to him earlier."

"What do you mean?"

"I told him what I'd do if he broke your heart," Miri told her smugly.

"You *didn't*." Lysana went red.

"He took it pretty well, all things considered. I just hope I didn't scare him away."

Lysana snuck a glance at him. "Oh god, he's watching us. I bet he's heard everything we've said."

Miri laughed scornfully. "Only if he's a vampire."

"And we know *they* don't exist, despite what the papers say." She grinned at Nick, and he smiled politely back. He'd heard everything she said, now if only he knew what she meant....

She turned back to Miri. "I hope this means I don't have to put up with that daytime clod anymore."

"You mean the balding guy with no sense of humor?"

"That's the one."

"Oh, I don't know. Into every life, a little comic relief must fall."

"Comic constipation in his case. But I guess I'll just have to wait and find out." Lysana tried to hide her grimace.

A tap on his shoulder made Nick wheel, but it was only Schanke. "I interviewed the students," he said. "Nobody heard something suspicious and nobody saw him come in." He waited a beat. "Boy, would I like to interview this 'Nobody' clown."

Nick smiled weakly and let it pass. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. There were traces of blood on the knife, but the lab'll have to examine it before we know more. There was a 'V' bruise on his neck, so he definitely died from hanging." He glanced around. "I don't know. It's all too pat for me."

"You don't think he killed himself?" Nick asked.

"Well, all the evidence so far says he did, but I've got a bad feeling.... What about this Nathan chick? You think we should keep on with her, just in case?"

Nick shrugged. "That's up to her."

Schanke nodded and drifted back into the crowd. The uniforms began to finish up, and the crowd, in ones and twos, started to disperse. Lysana watched as Miri got into the elevator, while she stayed in the hallway.

Nick walked over to Lysana, who was regarding the naked *Playboy* woman with disgust. "Can I talk with you?"

She swung around. "Sure, but does it have to be... here?" She wrinkled her nose at the pin-up.

"No," he said with a smile. "It doesn't have to be here. Where would you like to go?"

She smiled at him. "Why don't you walk me to my dorm? We can talk on the way."

He nodded, and she headed for the stairs. "What do you want to talk about?" she asked as they descended.

"Do you still want protection?" he asked.

She halted on a landing and looked back up at him. "Do you think Brad did it?" She paused. "Killed those girls, I mean?"

"I'm fairly sure," he replied.

She started down once again, obviously thinking, "Will I ever see you again if I don't want protection?"

"I'm sure you will," he told her. *In a few years*, he added mentally.

She looked sad. "Then I really don't think so. If you're sure Brad's the killer, that's good enough for me." She grinned. "It was pleasant to have you watching over me, in any case."

"Thank you. I think."

"No," she said, pushing open the door to the ground floor. "I'm serious. I felt safe with you."

*Safe?* his mind screamed. *You were never safe.* He made no reply, however, and soon they were outside.

The night sky was a lush navy blue spotted here and there with a single star. A gibbous moon rode the sky, lending a clear, silvery light to the trees and ground below. Lysana turned to him, and he could see the sky reflected in her eyes, moon and stars both.

She spun, laughing delightedly. "Isn't the night wonderful?" she asked, her eyes flashing golden. A fitful breeze stirred her hair, and then a stronger one blew it out behind her in a long, flowing tail. She spread her arms joyfully, leaning into the wind.

She looked like a moon-sprite, all silvery limbs and pale skin, with hair of purest midnight coiling about her. He stood transfixed by the sight, and then she grabbed his hand and started to run, pulling him along after her.

She led him, laughing, on a twisting path through the trees. He felt alive for once, every sense stretched to the limit as they danced and dodged through the oaks and pines.

At last, she could run no more, and they collapsed onto the cool ground beneath a pine tree, still laughing and entranced like a pair of giddy schoolchildren.

She leaned up against him, her chest heaving, but with a quiet contentment on her face. "That was fun," she told him.

"Yeah," he agreed, hugging her closer to him. Impulsively, he pressed a kiss to her temple, and then to her lips as she turned to face him.

He bore her to the ground, and she embraced him, her lips meeting his hungrily. He devoured her, tasting the moonlight on her cheeks before moving slowly back to her lips once more.

The scent of her was everywhere, but he resisted the urge to kiss her neck, contenting himself with her lips and face. She giggled as he kissed her eyelids, moaned as he caressed her breasts through her shirt. She massaged his back with her fingers, unkinking his muscles inch by inch until he was totally relaxed.

He measured her eyebrows in kisses, sucked on her earlobes and let himself be drawn once again to her mouth. She was as ready for the kiss as he was, and the incredible sweetness of it drove all thoughts from his mind.

They broke the kiss by mutual consent and lay in each others arms for a while, her cheek on his chest. Her warmth relaxed him further, and he was loath to move, totally content.

"I don't want this to end," she said at last. "But I'll be stiffer than a board if I lay here much longer."

"I don't know if I *can* move," he replied. "I'm so relaxed I feel like a puddle."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," she said with a grin, tracing his chest with a fingernail. "You don't feel like a puddle to me." She got to her feet and took his hands in hers. "Come on, Romeo," she said, pulling him to a sitting position. "Time to get up and go home."

He let her drag him to his feet. "Besides," she coaxed. "If you really want to continue this, my dorm room is *much* warmer."

"Is that the only plus?" he asked.

"Well, beds are better on the back than ground any day," she replied, leading him once again to a path. "But an audience cramps my style."

They walked in silence for a few moments. "Will I really ever see you again?" she asked. "And don't lie to me this time. I want to know the truth."

He could hardly refuse her. "Yes, you will see me again," he replied, truthfully this time. Surely once or twice wouldn't hurt...

She smiled into his eyes. "Did you know your eyes are like blue ice in the moonlight?"

Worried, he answered her with a question of his own. "Did you know *your* eyes turn gold?"

She laughed at that. "No, I'm glad you told me. To me, they're just plain old brown."

"Nothing about you is 'plain old,'" he told her.

"Thanks," she said, laying her head on his shoulder. His arm automatically curled around her waist.

"I'm sorry about Miri," she said with an apologetic smile. "She seems to think I need a protector."

"You do," he replied, fingering the hair on the nape of her neck.

She swung her head to look at him. "You offering?" she asked with a grin.

"I don't think I'm qualified," he replied.

"You were qualified enough earlier," she said softly. "What's the matter with now?"

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, looking away.

"If I thought you were going to hurt me, I wouldn't be here with you," she said. "I have good judgement about people." She hesitated. "Usually," she concluded.

She was quiet for a moment, eyes far away. "I trust you," she said at last. "Maybe I shouldn't. I mean, you keep trying to push me away often enough." She smiled bleakly. "But I do anyway. I know you care about me, I've seen it in your eyes." She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. "If you really didn't care, you wouldn't be trying so hard to push me away."

"You don't know me," he warned her, catching her hand with his own. "I could be just as bad, if not worse, than Brad ever was."

"I'll take my chances," she replied. "But I don't think you're half as bad as *you* think you are."

"You could be wrong," he said.

"Maybe, but I don't think so." She pulled her hand out from under his, eyes sparkling gold. Swiftly, she kissed him, warm lips brushing his before he could react.

He caught her before her lips could leave his, crushing her to him and devouring her mouth hungrily. He wanted her to be frightened, to pull away and leave him, never to return. But she clung to him, matching his kiss with ferocious intensity.

He wanted to scare her, but, he thought wryly, she didn't seem to be scared. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying it. Enjoying it entirely too much from his point of view. He broke away, confused, before the surges of need pulsing through him became a full-fledged hunger.

"That was good," she said, grinning up at him with cocky insouciance. "Let's do it again."

He spun away from her, trying to control himself over a sudden wave of hunger. His fists clenched as he tried to stop the change. The pleasure/pain of his fangs sliding out stopped halfway, turning it into agony. His muscles stopped in midshift, freezing him where he stood.

"I can't," he managed around his fangs. "Please. Go." He shivered as renewed longing blazed through him. He was barely holding himself in check, but she didn't move.

"What's happening, Nick? What's going on?" she asked, her voice a mixture of alarm and puzzlement.

"I can't tell you," he said, clenching his fists tighter yet, blood trickling from where his nails cut into the flesh of his palms.

"No." She sounded sad. "You *won't* tell me. There's a big difference."

"Go!" he shouted, sinking to his knees as his fangs slipped fully free, his muscles sliding into new positions on his body.

He heard her hesitate, and then take off at a run, crashing through the trees and underbrush. He waited until even he could no longer hear her before letting vent his frustration and loneliness in a scream that sounded more like the cry of a howling animal than any human voice.

He'd done it. He'd finally driven her away forever. But could he live with the consequences?

\*

He tried not to think about her as he went about his usual duties at the station house. *I have to forget her*, he thought. *I can't be responsible for another innocent person's death.* He frowned down at his hands, looking for the bloodstains that were not carried there, but in his heart.

And yet, to go without seeing her again was unthinkable. He thought of the stars reflected in her warm, bright eyes, the sweet curve of her lips as she smiled, the soft scent of her hair that was more beautiful than the finest perfume. He wanted her, and he so desperately wished he was human again, so that he could see her and not want to taste her blood, so he could kiss her throat without searching for the jugular, so her could make love to her and not the obscene parody he'd lived out for over eighty years. He slammed the file cabinet closed, wishing he could use all his strength.

"Hey stranger, could you spare a minute?" Her voice was warm, and he turned slowly, not able to believe she was there.

She perched on top of his desk, her eyes smiling warmly at him. He was next to her before he was aware he'd moved. She shook her head once, clearing the hair from out of her eyes and took his outstretched hand.

So soft. Her skin was so soft. And he wanted her so much.

"Why are you here?" he asked. "I thought you'd never want to see me again." He stroked the soft skin on the back of her hand with his thumb, caressing it over and over.

"You can't push me away that easily," she retorted. "Besides, we had a meeting three days ago, and we decided to give you these." She dipped her fingers into the breast pocket of her denim jacket and pulled out two slips of glossy paper.

"What are they?" he asked, keeping his eyes on her face.

"Tickets to our first night's performance. After all the hard work you two did, we figured it was only fair to invite you." She grinned at him. "You're invited to the cast party afterwards as well. That's my *personal* invitation." She slid off the desk. "I hope we see you there."

"I'm sure you will," he replied with a smile he hardly felt, taking the tickets from her.

She turned to go, but he laid his hand gently on her shoulder, and she turned to face him once more. "Aren't you going to ask me about...that night?" he asked.

Her face was serious, her eyes warm gold. "I have to admit, I am curious, but I figure you'll tell me when you're ready. The only problem is mustering the patience to wait." She was quiet, and her eyes darkened to a deep topaz. "Someday you'll trust me enough to tell me." She slowly turned and walked out, her curtain of hair waving softly in rhythm with her steps.

\*

The dark theater was completely quiet as Dracula went to his well-deserved rest. Then the stage lights went completely dark and a burst of thunderous applause shook the air as the house lights came up. The young performers took their bows, and went running into the wings as the theater crowd dispersed back into the chill night air.

Nick and Schanke fought their way to the stage and ascended into the back of the proscenium. The lights here were dim as the stagehands shut off the big overhead lights, but Nick could hear the excited talk and giggling resounding from the dressing rooms in the back.

"Where is this party, anyway?" Schanke asked.

"I'm not sure," Nick replied. "She just invited us. We should ask her."

"Good idea," Schanke said, heading towards the back.

"Not so fast," Nick said, catching him by the shoulder. "They'll still be getting out of their costumes."

"I know," Schanke replied with a lurid grin.

The theater was empty now, the metal double doors swinging closed with resounding thuds as the last of the audience scurried out into the night.

Miri was the first to emerge from the back of the theater, clad in a simple pair of jeans and T-

shirt, and brushing out her long blonde hair. "So, what did you think?" she asked them, her green eyes bright.

"It was excellent," Schanke told her. "Out-of-this-world fabulous. You guys are good enough to go on Broadway."

"Oh, I doubt we're *that* good," she said with a grin, "but I'm glad you think so." She shifted her gaze to Nick. "What did you think, Detective Knight?"

"It was...very effective," he replied. "Who took over for Brad?"

"Oh, that was Nigel. He's very good at playing villains. I think he stunned the audience with his voice alone." She grinned at both of them. "Did Lysana invite you to the party?"

Nick nodded, and she laughed. "Okay, come on back with me to the green room. I don't think anyone will mind."

"Why should anyone mind?" Schanke asked.

"Well, you do bring back some... unpleasant memories for us. But we did want you to have the tickets. You deserved them."

A punch bowl filled with a murky red liquid labeled "vampire food" sat on one table, with stacks of red cups around it. Cupcakes decorated with candy-corn fanged vampire faces, bats and lemon-yellow crescent moons were also on the table, while a second table held a selection of chips and dips. A CD boom box had been set up in one corner, with a stack of tapes and CD's ready for play.

The actors drifted in by ones and twos, laughing and joking. The stagehands followed, and one slipped a CD into the boom box, letting the strains of "Good Golly, Miss Molly" blast through the room.

Lysana was one of the last to arrive, her face still slightly shiny from the cold cream she'd used to clean her face. When she saw him, her face brightened and she made her way over to where Nick stood against one wall.

"Hi," she said softly. "I wasn't sure you were coming."

"I liked the play," he told her, and watched her smile proudly. "You were very good."

"Not bad for a biochemistry student, huh?" she asked, her eyes warming from a rich chocolate brown to a deep amber.

"Not bad even for an acting student," he replied, watching her eyes grow brighter yet, to a pale gold.

"Did you ever find my brooch?" she asked, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm.

"No," he told her. "We searched everywhere we could. We couldn't find any of the missing pictures, either. I'm afraid he stashed them so well that we'll never find them."

Her eyes darkened. "My grandmother gave me that brooch. It's all I have left of her. I can't believe it's gone," she said sadly.

It occurred to him to suggest getting another one, but he knew the answer to that even before he posed the question. Its main value was sentimental, not material.

She seemed to read his mind. "It was a one-of-a-kind piece. I could never find another like it." She looked up at him once more. "What was the final verdict on Brad?"

"Suicide," he told her. He glanced around swiftly and said, "Should we talk about this here?"

"No, not if you don't want to. Let's go to the dressing room. I want to hear this."

She led the way, snatching a vampire cupcake from the tray as she passed. The dressing rooms reeked of sweat and cold cream, but the noise of the party receded to a faint rumble.

"Brad committed suicide," he told her. "Everything points to it. The note, the prepared rope."

She passed a hand over her face. "I didn't think he was capable of it," she murmured. "He told me long ago that suicide was a 'permanent solution to a temporary problem'. I never thought he could go through with it."

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said, keeping his hands at his sides with an effort. He wouldn't be trapped again by the softness of her skin, the silky fall of her hair.... "We're checking the knives we found against the wounds he made on the... girls," he said, hesitating to say 'victims'.

"Knives?"

"Yeah, it turns out Brad was a knife nut. Had fifty or sixty of them in his room alone."

"God." He flinched, but she didn't notice. "I thought I knew him, but I didn't know him at all."

"It is that way with people sometimes," he told her.

He watched as she wrapped herself tightly in her arms, misery and pain evident on her face. He reached out without thinking about it, stroking her brown hair gently. She closed her eyes and leaned back against him with a sigh.

There was a knock on the door. A young man peered around the edge and smiled at them. "I've found you," he announced happily. His eyes zeroed in on Nick. "There's a call for you, Detective."

"All right," Nick said, distracted by the warmth of her body against his. "I'll be there in a minute." The boy nodded and shut the door.

"Will you be all right?" he asked.

Lysana nodded. "But under the circumstances, I don't feel much like celebrating." She got up and walked slowly to the door, smiling weakly at him before she left.

The student actor led him to the director's office, which had a fifties style phone. The receiver had been left off, and he snatched it up. "Knight."

"How's my favorite vampire detective?" Jack asked him cheerfully.

A slow grin spread across Nick's features. "When did *you* get back?" he asked.

"Just a few hours ago. I went by your apartment, but you weren't there."

"I went to see a play."

"So I gathered."

"It was part of the case I was working on," Nick felt forced to explain.

"The 'Vampire' murders?"

"Yeah." He hesitated. "Did the tests on the knives finally come through?"

"Yes. I've got bad news, though. None of the knives matched the wounds on the victims' necks. They were knife wounds, by the way. Human teeth caused some additional tearing at the corners, but the fatal wounds were inflicted with a knife. Some were close, but none were an exact match. Oh, and another thing."

"Yeah?"

"Brad's death definitely *wasn't* a suicide. He'd been struck over the head before he was killed. Judging by the bruise I found under his hair, he was out cold when he was being strung up."

"That means the killer is still on the loose. And Lysana is still in danger!" He dropped the phone and dashed out into the hall. He had to find her.

\*

The party was just getting fully underway. Talk and punch flowed freely, and one side of the room had turned into an impromptu dance floor.

Nick scanned the room, but saw no trace of Lysana. He grabbed her friend, Miri. "Where's Lysana?" he asked her urgently.

Her eyes grew wide with alarm. "She left a few minutes ago. She said she didn't feel well." She studied him. "She's in trouble, isn't she?"

He nodded, and she closed her eyes. "One of the stagehands is escorting her home."

A nameless fear seized him. "Which one?" he demanded.

"A.K.," she said, frowning. "Aloysius. But he prefers Kevin."

Nick cursed under his breath and ran from the room.

\*

The night was cold and foggy, but the full moon provided good light as Nick soared over the campus. A muted scream caught his attention, and he landed and ran towards the sound.

Lysana was holding her arms up defensively as the tall, dark stagehand jabbed at her with a folding knife. Once more, she deflected it, biting her lip in pain as a new cut joined the others marring her pale arms. Trickles of blood ran down to her elbows, but she appeared otherwise unharmed.

Nick advanced, holding his hands out in a peaceful gesture. "Come on, Kevin, put down the

knife."

Kevin wheeled, long arms windmilling as he stabbed at Nick repeatedly with the sharp bit of metal.

He'd gotten too close. One of the jabs got Nick just under the breastbone, and he gritted his teeth against the pain as the knife was yanked free. Another thrust slid along his arm, but was stopped by the thick leather of his jacket.

Lysana screamed, and Kevin turned back to her with a nasty grin plastered across his face.

"I'll bet your blood tastes good," he said, jabbing at her with the knife. Playing with her, Nick realized, as he felt his body heal. Lysana danced away from the blade, darting panicked glances at Nick, who was slowly getting to his feet. If she could only keep him occupied a while longer....

He leapt at Kevin, who whirled once more, his blade flashing in the moonlight. But this time, he only managed to scratch Nick's hand.

An obscene bubbling hiss issued from Nick's mouth as he spat the blood from his healed lung. Kevin turned a pasty white and they tumbled to the ground together in a tangle of flailing arms and legs.

Despite landing several vicious uppercuts, the fight seemed to have gone out of Kevin. The terrified look on his face as he grappled with Nick confirmed it. "Bite me. Kill me. Make me like you," he alternately raved and pleaded. At last, Nick cuffed him, pinning him to the ground with a foot in the back, where Kevin writhed, but was unable to get away.

Lysana ran to him, and he opened his arms to receive her, luxuriating in the feel of her in his arms. She hugged him fiercely, but pulled back.

"You're hurt!" she said, drawing away from his embrace.

His wound had healed almost as soon as the knife had been withdrawn, but he couldn't tell her that. "I'm all right. He barely even touched me."

Her hands went under his shirt, fingers touching him in odd, oblique ways that made his skin tingle. Her eyes flashed up to meet his. "But I saw him knife you. I saw!" Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you lying to me?"

"She knows. She knows!" his mind screamed at him. He opened his mouth, but nothing come out. No suave lie, no easy prevarication. Nothing. He couldn't lie to her. He wanted to tell the truth, but he'd lose her if he did. He quietly shut his mouth.

She laid a hand on his arm. Through the leather, the warmth was wonderful, delicious, intoxicating. "I'll wait," she said, eyes warm. "I know it must be hard and you have things to do. But if you have anything you want to tell me, I'll be in my room." She pulled him to her and kissed him savagely. Their bodies ground together for long, sweet moments before she pulled away with a final kiss that was light and sweet and a soft caress. "Because I do love you."

She made to move away, but he reached out and pulled her back to him, squeezing her hand gently. "No, I want you to stay." Her eyes flicked to his. "Please," he finished.

She smiled again. "All right," she told him softly. "But I want the truth."

"You'll get it," he told her past the lump in his throat. But how was he going to explain. It didn't matter. He didn't want her to go and if it took telling the truth to do it, then that was the price he'd pay. Even if he lost her in the process.

She watched silently as Kevin was hauled off, babbling, by the uniformed police. Nick sincerely hoped they took Kevin's story, of the cop with fangs, to be simply the maudlinings of an unbalanced mind. Thankfully, it had been a long time since anyone believed in vampires. From the expressions of the two officers, they were only pretending to believe.

Nick dictated the incident to the head detective and Lysana told her side, reporting in glowing terms about Nick's heroics while giving him an amused glance out of the corner of her eye.

Finally, it was done. Lysana was shivering in the chill night air. A fog was rolling in off the bay, giving the air a smoky, shimmery look. The clouds looked like sea-borne foam in the sky, blotting out the light of the moon as they passed.

They walked to his car in silence. She fingered the leather jacket he'd thrown around her shoulders when he saw her shiver. She wrapped it more closely about her when the car pulled out and the wind pulsed over them like a living thing. He looked up and touched her cheek gently when they paused for

a light. The silence between them was a soft veil, folding about them in close embrace. It was not uncomfortable, and for that he was grateful.

He parked the car in front of his apartment and she glanced up, reading the marquee with a curious expression. "This is where you live?"

"Yeah."

"I like it. It has class." Her voice was soft, and his lips were on hers before he could stop himself. She clung to him tightly and he wished he could stay that way forever, with their arms about each other.

He broke the kiss to let her breathe. She gasped raggedly, but a smile was on her face. He keyed the door and escorted her inside.

Later, when they sat on his bed, he sensed her eyes expectantly on him and knew it was now or never.

"You know you only see me at night and never during the day. There's a reason for that. A good one. More than just working the night shift. I... Ah, shit! This is hard. Maybe I'd better show you."

She followed him obediently to the washbasin. Over it was a silvered mirror that had cracked from the fire's heat. It was still clear enough to reflect, though, and only she showed in it.

"What are you saying?" Her voice was neutral. Too neutral.

"I... I'm a vampire." His voice was dim, defeated.

"I know," she said with a smile.

He gaped at her and she kissed his nose with a quick movement. She gestured to the mirror. "This isn't the first mirror I've seen you in. At the theater, before I fell off the ladder. Two stagehands carried a mirror past you. You never saw them. I was so surprised I fell off the ladder."

He didn't reply. He *couldn't* reply. He groped for words with a mouth that was clogged with lead. She continued. "And you caught me. You certainly weren't a mad, ravening beast. For a while, I thought you might have been the one killing the women, but not for long. I fell in love with you. I *am* in love with you."

"Then why this?" he gestured helplessly.

"I needed to hear it from you. I needed to know you trusted me, but I couldn't be sure until you told me so yourself." She embraced him, and it took a second for him to respond. When he did, he crushed her to him and buried his face in the join of her neck and shoulder, stroking her back with his fingers.

She gasped for breath, and he released her. She held her sides for a few minutes before her breathing came back to normal. He'd have to remember to be more careful in the future.

And there would be a future. He'd never expected that. Never hoped, never dreamed. And now it was his. He picked her up and spun her about, like a child. She loved him. She started laughing happily, and he laughed too.

He kissed her again and she bared her neck, pushing back a curtain of deep coffee-colored hair to expose the pale creaminess of her skin. He felt the blood pulsing strongly under the surface, singing to him a siren song of temptation.

Her scent assaulted his senses, making him want her even more. It had been too long since he'd fed. Much too long. The blood of cattle from the slaughterhouses was nothing compared to human blood. Bread and water to a sumptuous feast. Hunger assailed him like an angry tiger, sinking claws into his stomach. His fangs burned, a continuous ache, and he wanted her as never before. All his tortuous wants were as nothing compared to this, with her freely offering herself to him with the knowledge of what he was.

It was with an effort he broke away from the sight. "No," he moaned. "I can't." He covered his eyes with a forearm and turned away. How could he have deluded himself into thinking *this* could be his, that he could love her like a normal man?

"I don't mind," she said softly, reaching out to knead the tension from his neck and upper back.

"You don't understand," he said, relaxing under her touch.

"Try me." She reached around to hug him to her, her breasts like twin pools of heat against his back.

"I've never... I'll kill you if I try to drink—" he broke off lamely.

"How much do you need?" Her voice was curious, interested.

"I'm not sure." It was embarrassing to admit. "When I was...first made, I killed...many people."

He turned to face her, but her face showed only sympathy, not condemnation. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I assure you, I have no interest in dying through exsanguination." She made a small movement of her lips that could in no way be called a smile. "How much do you drink?"

"Half a cup a day." He felt strange, talking about such things with her. It wasn't something he liked to think about.

"Does it satisfy you?" Her amber eyes caught and held his. "I need to know. Please, be truthful."

"Sometimes." He waited for the earth to swallow him up. No, he'd have to live through his embarrassment.

"You deliberately starve yourself and then worry about hurting me?" She shook her head. "I'd love to have your self control."

"I... thank you. I think." They made their way over to the bed again and she sat down with apparent unconcern.

"Are all vampires as self-punishing as you?" Seeing the question in his eyes, she went on. "You torture yourself every day. Do all vampires do that?"

"Other vampires kill. They don't care about," he remembered a word LaCroix used to describe his victims, "meat."

"Meat." She was silent after that, and he was afraid he'd lost her. "That says still more for your self-control."

"I only wish I had more. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

\*

The sun was rising in the hills as he made it up to the door of his place. He hadn't seen Lysana now for five days and the loss of her was like an ache in his gut. *This is what it will be like*, he decided. She'd left him without saying good-bye, and he'd be forever left with the ache of loss. And forever, for him, was a long time indeed. He wondered if he would remember her with the same clarity when she was dead, and whether time would blunt the sharp edge of longing that, even now, came with her memory.

The pungent smell of tallow was a shock to his senses. Candles? Here? And then he saw her, in the shadows. "How did you get in here?" he demanded, while his blood sang in joy.

"I saw the combination when you showed me in." Her smile was a brilliant flash in the near-darkness. "I'm a fast study." She looked him right in the eye. "I only forgot to ask if it was true that vampires fall into comas during the day."

"If it is?"

"I'll wait. I'm very good at that." Her life was a beacon, bright in the dead lifelessness of his apartment. He didn't think that he could need anyone as much as he needed her now.

"No. I sleep because I'm tired, and there's nothing else to do. I do work, you know." He groaned low in his throat as her scent literally slapped him across the face. She smelled so good, like... He couldn't even come up with the words to adequately describe it. Like food to a starving man. Given how he felt, it was certainly appropriate. But he wanted her no less.

"Come on. I have a surprise for you." She took his hand in hers and led him down the hall and up the steps, almost dancing in her enthusiasm. The smell of tallow was strong. Very strong. But not strong enough to drown out her scent.

She'd turned his bed into something out of an Arabian Nights dream. Soft, filmy fabrics hung from the ceiling and an array of fat, pillar candles perched on a wide variety of objects, providing a soft light that was diffused and colored by the fabric swathes.

She materialized at his elbow. "Do you like it? It was just a whim, really." Her skin glowed a burnished gold in the dim light, and her hair was a dark copper cloud flowing down to the middle of her back. Her eyes, by contrast, were obsidian-dark, catching the light in brief golden flashes.

She wore only an old T-shirt nightgown, the insignia to some college scribed in faded letters

across the front. In one hand she held a crystal goblet, in the other a pitcher filled with blood. He realized she was still waiting for his reply. "I like it very much."

Her cheeks flushed and she dropped her eyes. "Thanks."

"Do you really think this will work?" Did she really think drinking enough blood would allow him to have the control not to kill her?

"Yes." She raised her face to his. "It's got to."

His hands itched to hold her, to touch the smooth softness of her skin. The call of her blood was still there, yes, but his control held firm. God, how he wanted her....

"And what are you going to do while I'm busy... drinking?" His eyes raked her body. Her scent washed over him once again, and his self-control was hard-pressed to remain. His gums ached like liquid fire, a slow, sweet, tortured agony. He couldn't bear her so close.

"Whatever you want me to."

Oh god, how she could torment him so. He raised the glass and drank deeply, without pausing, until he reached the bottom. He couldn't savor it, not with her standing so close, wanting him.

A warmth spread through his stomach as she refilled the glass. Every movement released more of her scent until his head swam with the nearness of her.

He drank and drank as she refilled the glass endless times. He felt drunk, drunk on her nearness. His vision shrank until it encompassed only her, smiling gently at him.

He was unaware when the change came, when the wanting became too much. He threw his head back, feeling the brief burst of sweet pain when his fangs burst through at last and his face changed and his muscles thickened.

Her eyes were still on him, curious and accepting. She smiled at him and pursed her lips, blowing him a kiss. Her breath was warm on his skin as she drew closer. She kissed him.

His lips ravaged hers for long, endless moments. Finally, he came up for air and saw her regarding him with a sweet smile.

"You aren't afraid of me?" His voice was hoarse.

"No, why should I be? You'll never hurt me. I trust you."

Her heartbeat was fast and thready but it never charged pace once while she spoke. And he knew she was telling the truth. She trusted him. He would have laughed if it hadn't been so sad. He might kill her, and still she trusted him.

She licked her slightly swollen lips. "Would you like some more?"

"Yes." Anything to keep from hurting her.

She pulled back her hair from her neck, exposing the slim, pale column of her throat dyed a rich gold by the candle's glow. She met his gaze, calm and unafraid. She opened her arms, strangely compelling. He moved into her embrace, his palms kneading her back as he captured her mouth for a fierce kiss.

Her slim arms closed about his body, her hands sliding under his T-shirt to clutch at the skin of his back. Her thighs clasped his legs, pulling them into an even closer embrace, and her mouth was hot and sweet against his.

He pulled his mouth away gently. Her swollen and reddened lips were slightly parted, her breath coming hot and hard. He nibbled gently on her lips before kissing her once again. He shifted slightly, bringing one hand around to massage her breasts.

She moaned softly, her hips digging hard into his. He moved his mouth to the right slightly to let her breathe, continuing to press kisses across the jaw and down to her neck.

She moaned again as he teased her neck with his tongue, drawing the tip down just under her earlobe and from there to her shoulder. He nibbled gently with his teeth, being careful not to break the skin. Her scent washed over him in continual, burning waves. He wanted her so badly, but he could never hurt her.

He pulled away. He could not do this! Her eyes flickered open. "What's wrong?"

"I can't hurt you." He looked away.

"You won't."

"I..." He looked at her and then looked away again. She pulled her body back. He was glad she

was going, but it hurt at the same time.

Cloth rustled and something soft hit the floor. He glanced in her direction and his jaw dropped. She was naked, and her eyes were terrible. "Come here." There was no gentleness in those words, merely command.

He walked over to her. He had never seen her like this before. When he stopped before her, he noticed something else, a quicksilver twinkle in her eye that told him she was still the same person underneath.

"Strip." Her voice was losing its coldness by the minute.

"What?" He hadn't expected this.

"Do you realize I've never seen you naked before? Strip this instant!" She was grinning at him, unable to maintain a straight face.

"Yes, mistress," he said, his tone mock-servile. She giggled softly, but stopped, eyes widening, as he doffed his shirt. She ran her hands over his chest, along his wiry shoulders and trim stomach.

"Go on, the rest," she prodded, but her voice was quiet now, her eyes large and luminous.

He did, and she ran her fingers down his legs and across his feet before rising and embracing him. Their hips ground together, sending a jolt of sensation through him. "Do you feel that?" she asked. "Do you feel us?"

"Yes." His words came as though from a great distance away.

"That's why I'm not afraid of you. You can't hurt me." She wet her lips. "Nick, I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone or anything. Please, let me show you how much I love you."

Slowly, the tension flowed out of his body. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes."

"I love you," she said, kissing him. And then her eyes locked with his, warm and golden. He felt his defenses crumble away, leaving him naked and exposed. For a moment, he was too shocked to care, and then, a wave of giddy exultation swept him up. He wanted it to be like this, wanted her to love him as he was.

He closed her in his arms, feeling her skin warm against his. She ran her hand down his chest, teasing him with the tips of her fingers, and then moved lower. He felt his body stir in response and looked down in surprise.

"I didn't think that was possible."

She only smiled and kissed him. "Who told you it wasn't?"

"La— My mentor."

"I'm glad he was wrong," she whispered in his ear, stroking his thigh with her nails.

He kissed her in the middle of her smile, their tongues dueling softly back and forth. "So am I."

"Then show me," she invited with a smile, drawing back from him and spreading her arms wide.

He lunged at her and she fled, giggling. He cornered her near the wall. The light here was dim and colored by the translucent hangings. It colored their skin with ever-shifting hues as the candle flames flickered. She wasn't giggling now, her eyes wide and serious. Wordlessly, he kissed her.

She returned it with vigor. He felt the heat of her thighs surround him, and he surged into her, felt her heat surround him. The rhythm came back to him easily, and with it, a feeling of pleasure. Being inside of her felt so right. He groaned as she clutched at his back, nipping fretful kisses across her collarbone.

The thudding of her heart was music to his ears, and her breathing swift and strong. She caught her breath once as he licked her throat. She tasted good. So very good.

She shivered once as his fangs entered her. And then he was drinking the sweet, life-giving taste of her, cream and moonlight and gold. It filled the dark places inside him with the essence of her. She clutched at him again, a soft moan emanating from her throat. Then, she sagged against him limply.

A burning pleasure filled him as he clutched her to him even tighter. For a brief moment, he struggled against the wave of sensation, but then it rolled over him and dragged him under, filling his veins with flame.

\*

When he came to himself again, he was still inside her, pressing her to the wall, her fingers stroking his hair gently. He found the gentle tugging pleasant and was content to stay there in her arms. Her fragrance wove about him like a caress, and he smiled, snuggling closer to her warm skin.

But wait. Wasn't there something he'd forgotten? The blood. His craving for blood. It was gone. The only time he'd ever felt this way was when he'd gorged on the blood of natives, so very long ago. He was sated, content.

And she was still alive. That was the most important thing. He looked up at her and she smiled warmly, using her arm to hug him closer. An echoing warmth burned in his stomach and he could still taste traces of her on his lips. He wondered how her blood could have affected him like that. His thought broke off as she bent to kiss him and a flare of desire raced through his veins. It didn't matter anyway. After all, he had an eternity to find out.

- The End -

*[Nick and Janette's origins in the dark, forbidden jungles of South America were related in gruesome detail in a story by Ms. Savignano which appeared in **Good Guys Wear Fangs 1.**]*



## **HEART OF A WOMAN**

*by Lisa Savignano*

*You are so kind to me,  
so loving, so beautiful.  
How could I ever deserve you?  
I took a liberty by kissing you  
and it felt so good.  
Then I pulled away,  
because I knew you could never love me.  
But you smiled and kissed me again,  
pulling me against your body.  
Your eyes go so dark when you're against me,  
lazy, smoky eyes  
that make me want to kiss....  
Ah, but you've already found that out,  
haven't you?  
Your love encompasses me,  
and I am deep within.  
Not trapped, not bound,  
but safe.  
I like that feeling.*



FOREVER KNIGHT

DEYJA

written

by

Denysé M. Bridger

© November, 1995

[This script had been read by the producers of Forever Knight and was under consideration for production at the time that cancellation was announced.]

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**DEYJA:** (dead) derived from original past participle of an old verb base appearing in Old Norse

=====

FOREVER KNIGHT: **DEYJA**

FADE IN

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

EXTERIOR -- ALLEY NEAR THE CLUB

A COUPLE IS SEEN WALKING, THE WOMAN IS STUMBLING BADLY, AND APPEARS TO BE DRUNK, THE MAN IS LAUGHING AT HER. HE LEADS HER CLOSE TO THE WALL OF THE BUILDING AND THEY EMBRACE IN THE SHADOWS. SECONDS LATER SHE SLUMPS TO THE GROUND. THE MAN TURNS TO FACE THE CAMERA, GLOWING EYES AND FANGS REVEAL THAT HE IS A VAMPIRE. HE FLIES FROM THE ALLEY.

CUT TO

CLOSE UP OF AN ARTIST'S SKETCHBOOK, A HAND PUTS THE FINISHING TOUCHES TO A PORTRAIT. AS THE ARTIST SCRAWLS A SIGNATURE ACROSS THE BOTTOM OF THE PORTRAIT, "DEYJA", WE CLEARLY SEE THAT IT IS THE GIRL IN THE ALLEY.

FADE OUT

=====

FADE IN

=====

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE POLICE STATION

CUT TO

INTERIOR -- SQUAD ROOM

THE USUAL ACTIVITY OF THE SQUAD ROOM IS THE BACKGROUND, JUST OUTSIDE THE CAPTAIN'S OFFICE, REESE, KNIGHT, AND TRACY ARE LISTENING TO A REPORT FROM NATALIE LAMBERT, WHO LOOKS ANYTHING BUT HAPPY ABOUT WHAT SHE IS READING FROM THE FILE SHE CARRIES. FROM THEIR EXPRESSIONS IT IS OBVIOUS THAT NONE OF THEM ARE HAPPY WITH WHAT THEY ARE HEARING.

NATALIE

There's nothing! I've checked everything, then checked it again. Linda Redden shouldn't be dead.

REESE

What about the toxicology?

NATALIE  
The lab's rushing, we should  
have it in a few hours.

REESE DOESN'T LOOK ANY HAPPIER WITH THAT ANNOUNCEMENT.

REESE  
What are the chances this one  
is HIV positive too?

NATALIE SIGHS, HER EXPRESSION REVEALS THAT IT'S THE EXPECTED REPORT. FRUSTRATION CHANGES HER EXPRESSION AGAIN, AND SHE HUGS THE FILE FOLDER THAT SHE HOLDS.

NATALIE  
It's **not** the virus that's  
killing them. They carry the  
virus, but none of them have  
actually died of AIDS . . .

NATALIE (continued)  
. . . And all the tests indicate  
that it was way too early for that  
kind of panic to have driven all of  
them to suicide.  
(beat)  
At least that's my opinion.

NATALIE PAUSES, HER EXPRESSION BECOMES THOUGHTFUL, SPECULATIVE.

NATALIE (continued)  
It's possible they didn't even  
know they were HIV positive.

HER FRUSTRATION IS SHARED BY HER COLLEAGUES. REESE TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO THE DETECTIVES.

REESE  
Have you and Tracy checked  
out the nightclub? This is the  
third body in that area, all  
within the past month. I want  
answers.

NICK  
I've talked to the owner of the  
club, there doesn't seem to be  
a connection.

TRACY DOESN'T COMMENT, AND NATALIE'S EXPRESSION IS ONE OF WORRY. THE LAST THING ANY OF THEM WANT IS ATTENTION DRAWN TO THE RAVEN AND ITS CLIENTELE.

REESE

Doesn't seem to be, or isn't?  
Listen, Nick, I know you and  
Tracy have been working overtime  
on this one, but I can't keep  
using "we're investigating it"  
as our only comment.

THERE REALLY IS NOTHING LEFT TO SAY, AND ALL FOUR ARE SPEECHLESS FOR SEVERAL UNCOMFORTABLE MOMENTS BEFORE AN UNSPOKEN AGREEMENT SENDS EACH OF THEM OFF ON THEIR SEPARATE DUTIES. NATALIE CASTS A FINAL LOOK AT NICK, AND HE NODS AT HER INSISTENT EXPRESSION.

CUT TO

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

INTERIOR -- THE BAR

A YOUNG WOMAN ENTERS THE PLACE, LOOKS AROUND AND SPOTS JAVIER VACHON TALKING WITH URS. SOMETHING ABOUT HIM DRAWS HER AND SHE BEGINS TO MAKE HER WAY TOWARD HIM. HER PRESENCE HAS ALSO BEEN NOTED BY THE YOUNG VAMPIRE, AND HIS COMPANION.

THE STRANGER IS ALAYNE HARRISON. HER MANNER IS DISTANT, ALMOST DISDAINFUL, EVEN WITH THE SPACE THAT SEPARATES HER FROM THOSE WHO ARE OBSERVING HER ENTRANCE. SHE IS PALE, DARK HAIR, AND IN SPITE OF THE ILLUSION OF CASUAL ARROGANCE, SHE STILL APPEARS SOMEWHAT VULNERABLE.

IN THE BACKGROUND, LACROIX, TOO, HAS NOTICED THE NEWCOMER. HIS CURIOSITY IS OBVIOUS, BUT HE MAKES NO MOVE TO JOIN THE SUDDEN TRIO. THERE IS RECOGNITION IN HIS EXPRESSION, BUT WARINESS AS WELL.

ALAYNE

I'm Alayne.

VACHON APPEARS AMUSED BY HER DIRECTNESS, BUT ACCEPTS HER HAND WHEN SHE EXTENDS IT IN GREETING. INSTEAD OF A HANDSHAKE, HE KISSES HER FINGERS IN A COURTELY GESTURE. SHE LAUGHS QUIETLY.

ALAYNE

A gentleman. Unusual.

HER TONE IS CYNICAL, AND IT IS QUICKLY EVIDENT THAT SHE IS HIDING SOMETHING, THOUGH IT'S NOT CLEAR IF IT IS SIMPLY A DESIRE NOT TO BE SEEN, OR IF SHE IS IN FACT SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING IN HER OWN FASHION.

VACHON  
You're not a regular.

URS HAS QUIETLY DRIFTED AWAY, BUT SHE, LIKE LACROIX, HAS NOTICED SOMETHING DIFFERENT ABOUT THE NEW ARRIVAL.

CUT TO

LACROIX STOPS URS AS SHE MOVES TO PASS HIM.

LACROIX  
Who is she?

URS TAKES ANOTHER LOOK AT THE WOMAN, WHO IS NOW IN CONVERSATION WITH VACHON.

URS  
Her name's Alayne. She's  
hiding something.

LACROIX SEEMS TO AGREE, BUT SAYS NOTHING. WHEN URS CONTINUES ON HER WAY, HE DIRECTS HIS GAZE TOWARD THE COUPLE AT THE BAR.

VACHON AND ALAYNE ARE TALKING QUIETLY AND SHE IS TOUCHING HIS FACE, HER EYES INTENT, AS IF MEMORISING THE FEATURES. JAVIER'S SMILE IS GENUINE, BUT THERE'S A WATCHFULNESS IN HIS LOOK THAT ALERTS LACROIX THAT THE YOUNGER MAN IS NOT ENTIRELY WITHOUT AWARENESS OF THE SAME INSTINCTIVE WARINESS THAT THE MASTER VAMPIRE FEELS.

CUT TO

EXTERIOR -- DOWNTOWN APARTMENT BUILDING

NICK AND TRACY ARE JUST EMERGING FROM THE BUILDING WHEN NICK'S CELL PHONE RINGS. HE OPENS IT AS THEY CONTINUE WALKING TOWARD THE CADDY PARKED AT THE CURB.

NICK  
Knight.

HE LISTENS, HIS EXPRESSION REVEALS INTEREST AND A SLOW SMILE BEGINS TO LIGHT HIS FACE.

NICK  
We'll be right there, Nat.

NICK SNAPS THE PHONE SHUT AND SLIDES INTO THE DRIVER'S SEAT. TRACY WAITS, AND NICK EXPLAINS AS THEY PULL INTO TRAFFIC.

NICK  
Natalie's got the toxicology.  
There were traces of Lidocaine  
Hydrochloride in Linda Redden's  
blood. The lab's just confirmed it.

TRACY IS EXCITED BY THE NEWS, TOO.

TRACY  
What about the others?

NICK  
We won't know that until we  
talk to Natalie.

CUT TO

INTERIOR -- THE RAVEN

ALAYNE IS SEEN LEAVING THE CLUB, VACHON IS WATCHING HER.

LACROIX APPROACHES ONCE SHE IS GONE.

LACROIX  
She's dangerous.

VACHON  
She's lonely.

LACROIX  
Don't be a fool, my young friend.  
You've felt it yourself.

VACHON (nods)  
Not danger. Something else.

LACROIX DOESN'T LOOK CONVINCED, BUT ACCEPTS VACHON'S ASSERTION.

CUT TO

INTERIOR -- APARTMENT

THE PLACE IS SMALL, WELL FURNISHED, BUT NOT ELABORATE. ONE CORNER OF THE LIVING ROOM IS DOMINATED BY A DRAWING TABLE. OPEN ON THE BOARD IS A SKETCHBOOK, ON THE PAGE IS A PARTIALLY COMPLETED PORTRAIT OF VACHON.

ALAYNE HARRISON ENTERS THE ROOM FROM THE KITCHEN, COFFEE CUP IN HAND. SHE SIPS FROM THE MUG, HER EYES CLOSE, AND SHE SMILES. SECONDS LATER, SHE PICKS UP THE CHARCOAL PENCIL AND BEGINS TO WORK ON THE PICTURE.

END SCENE

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FADE IN

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- POLICE STATION

INTERIOR -- CAPTAIN REESE'S OFFICE

KNIGHT IS STANDING NEAR THE DOOR, REESE IS LISTENING TO HIM, LOOKS MUCH MORE PLEASED THAN THE PREVIOUS NIGHT.

NICK

Natalie's backtracking, but she's pretty sure she'll find the same drug. Tracy's already talking to the friends and relatives again. Linda's roommate gave us a pretty good description of the last guy she dated.

REESE (sceptical)

You think this guy might be the connection?

NICK DOESN'T LOOK GENUINELY CERTAIN, BUT SHRUGS.

NICK

It's the only lead we've got.

REESE SIGHS HEAVILY, BUT NODS.

REESE

Just keep me posted.

NICK SMILES AND QUICKLY EXITS THE OFFICE.

CUT TO

INTERIOR -- THE RAVEN

ALAYNE IS AT THE BAR, VACHON IS NOT PRESENT, AND LACROIX WATCHES UNOBTRUSIVELY. SHE ATTRACTS A GREAT DEAL OF INTEREST, MOSTLY BECAUSE SHE IS OCCUPIED WITH A DRAWING AND PEOPLE STOP TO LOOK OVER HER SHOULDER. SHE ALL BUT IGNORES EVERYONE AROUND HER, BUT OCCASIONALLY SHE LOOKS AROUND. SHE IS SEARCHING FOR SOMEONE. WHEN ONE OF THE MEN WHO HAS BEEN ATTEMPTING TO TALK TO HER TAKES HER ARM TO GET HER ATTENTION, SHE JERKS AWAY AND GLARES AT HIM.

LACROIX SENSES TROUBLE AND IS INSTANTLY AT THE BAR. HE STEPS AROUND THE MAN AND STANDS AT ALAYNE'S BACK. THE LOOK ON HIS FACE IS A CLEAR WARNING.

LACROIX  
Find someone else to bother.

THE YOUNG MAN SCURRIES OFF AND ALAYNE LOOKS CLOSELY AT LACROIX. HE RETURNS HER SCRUTINY FOR A MOMENT, THEN TURNS HIS BACK TO THE BAR, LEANS ON IT AND SMILES AS HE SIPS FROM A CRYSTAL GOBLET FILLED WITH BLOOD WINE.

LACROIX  
Perhaps you'd find it more productive  
to take your art elsewhere?

ALAYNE LOOKS AMUSED, HER SMILE MIRRORS LACROIX'S MOCKING TONE.

ALAYNE  
You find my presence disruptive?

LACROIX  
Troublesome.

ALAYNE  
I'm waiting to see someone I met  
here a few nights ago.

LACROIX GLANCES AT HER SKETCHBOOK, IT IS A MUCH SMALLER VERSION TO ONE PREVIOUSLY SEEN IN HER APARTMENT. ANOTHER PORTRAIT OF VACHON. WHEN SHE SEES THE DIRECTION OF HIS GAZE, SHE SLAMS THE BOOK SHUT, BUT NOT BEFORE LACROIX CATCHES A GLIMPSE OF THE DISTORTION IN THE FEATURES. SHE HAS DRAWN THE YOUNG MAN AS A VAMPIRE. LACROIX'S EXPRESSION DOES NOT REVEAL WHAT HE HAS SEEN.

LACROIX  
Javier isn't here.

ALAYNE HESITATES FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS, THEN SLOWLY NODS AND SLIDES FROM HER BARSTOOL. LACROIX WATCHES AS SHE LEAVES THE CLUB. HE LOOKS UNEASY AS HE SIPS FROM HIS GLASS AND PONDERS WHAT HE'S SEEN IN THE SKETCHBOOK

...

FADE INTO FLASHBACK

NINETEENTH CENTURY FRANCE

LACROIX AND NICHOLAS ARE IN AN ELEGANTLY FURNISHED SITTING ROOM. LACROIX IS SEATED, LEGS CROSSSED CASUALLY, HIS ATTENTION SHIFTING BETWEEN THE CHESSBOARD ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF HIM AND THE AGITATED PACING OF HIS COMPANION.

LACROIX  
You're a fool, Nicholas. This  
latest escapade is even more  
ridiculous than the others.

NICHOLAS IS FURIOUS AND WHIRLS TO FACE HIS VAMPIRE MASTER.

NICHOLAS  
Is that why she's disappeared?  
Because you think I'm a fool, or  
were you afraid she'd find the  
answer?

LACROIX  
There is no 'answer'. After all  
these years, why won't you simply  
accept it?

NICHOLAS  
Because you're the only one who  
seems certain of that, LaCroix.  
And what reason do I have to  
believe you?

LACROIX'S EYEBROW GOES UP, BUT HE REMAINS SILENT. NICHOLAS SPINS ON HIS HEEL AND EXITS THE ROOM, RAGE AND BITTERNESS IN EVERY MOTION OF HIS BODY.

FADE OUT OF FLASHBACK

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE CORONER'S BUILDING

NICK AND TRACY ARE WAITING. NATALIE ENTERS, AND HOLDS UP A FILE, HER EXPRESSION TRIUMPHANT.

NATALIE  
Just back from the lab. Looks  
like we have a positive match  
on the drug. It was found in  
all three victims.

NICK  
So why didn't it show up before?

NATALIE  
There was no reason to look for  
something like this, Nick. The  
previous victims had more obvious  
injuries that could just as easily  
have accounted for their deaths.  
(pause)  
Cindy Baskin fell off her balcony,  
that makes the obvious cause of  
death the fall. Ellen Bruton was  
the victim of a hit and run. The  
only possible connection is the HIV,  
and that may be coincidence. The truth  
is, we wouldn't have looked closer  
except there was nothing obvious about  
Linda Redden's death.

TRACY  
So what have you got on the drug?

NATALIE  
Lidocaine Hydrochloride is a heart treatment, the standard dosage is two to three hundred milligrams. Exceed that dosage and you've got yourself a lethal weapon. It's fast acting, and clean. In Linda's case it was injected, probably ten to fifteen minutes before she died.

NICK  
Which means someone must have seen who gave her the injection. I assume we're ruling out suicide?

NATALIE SHRUGS AND SITS AT HER DESK. SHE DROPS THE FILE ONTO A PILE OF OTHERS AND LEANS HER ELBOWS ON THE DESKTOP.

NATALIE  
There's no way to know, but my best guess is that none of these women committed suicide. Why inject a lethal dose of something, then throw yourself off a balcony? Or in front of a car?

TRACY AND NICK EXCHANGE A LOOK OF AGREEMENT, THEN THEY HEAD TOWARD THE DOOR. NICK GLANCES BACK AT NATALIE AND SMILES.

NICK  
I'll call you tonight.

NATALIE RETURNS THE SMILE AND PULLS ANOTHER FILE FROM THE STACK AS SHE GOES BACK TO WORK.

CUT TO  
ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

INSIDE, VACHON IS PRESENT TONIGHT, AND ALAYNE HARRISON IS ON THE STAGE. SHE IS DANCING PROVOCATIVELY, HER EYES NEVER STRAY FROM JAVIER'S. HE IS ENJOYING THIS PERSONAL SHOW.

LACROIX WATCHES, AGAIN, HIS EXPRESSION UNREADABLE.

AS HER DANCE ENDS, VACHON GOES TO THE EDGE OF THE STAGE AND LIFTS HER DOWN TO STAND IN FRONT OF HIM. SHE IS CLEARLY ENTRANCED BY THE YOUNG VAMPIRE, AND FOR A LONG MOMENT THEY SIMPLY STARE AT EACH OTHER. VACHON BREAKS THE CONTACT FIRST AND GUIDES HER BACK TO THE BAR.

VACHON  
Do you enjoy dancing?

ALAYNE  
No.  
I enjoyed dancing for you.

VACHON IS PLEASED, AND ACCEPTS THE COMPLIMENT WITH A PLEASANT SMILE.

VACHON  
What do you want from me,  
Alayne?

ALAYNE  
Maybe I just want you?

VACHON  
That could be dangerous.

ALAYNE  
Maybe that's why I want you?

BEFORE THEIR VERBAL FENCING CAN GO FURTHER, A SCREAM CAPTURES EVERYONE'S ATTENTION. THE CROWD IN THE CLUB SEPARATES AND A YOUNG WOMAN LIES UNCONSCIOUS ON THE FLOOR.

LACROIX STEPS FORWARD, HIS GAZE MOMENTARILY DIVERTED BY A MOVEMENT NEAR THE DOOR. HE DOESN'T SEE CLEARLY, ONLY THE SENSE OF SOMEONE ESCAPING. HE REACHES THE FALLEN MORTAL THE SAME MOMENT AS VACHON AND ALAYNE.

LACROIX  
Check the alley.

VACHON IS STARTLED, BUT COMPLIES.

ALAYNE IS ON HER KNEES, HER MANNER EFFICIENT AND PROFESSIONAL AS SHE CHECKS FOR A PULSE AND INJURY. SHE JUMPS NOTICEABLY WHEN LACROIX BENDS NEXT TO HER AND TURNS THE WOMAN'S HEAD TO ONE SIDE. THERE ARE NO PUNCTURES ON HER NECK. ALAYNE STARES UP AT HIM.

ALAYNE  
She wasn't killed by one of you.  
This is the only injury.

ALAYNE IGNORES THE DANGEROUS NARROWING OF LACROIX'S GAZE, AND POINTS TO THE TINY WOUND ON THE WOMAN'S WRIST. A DROP OF BLOOD SLIPS FROM THE PUNCTURE AND LACROIX WIPES IT AWAY AND BRINGS HIS STAINED FINGER TO HIS LIPS. HE TASTES THE BLOOD AND SMILES AT HER.

LACROIX  
She's been drugged.  
(pause)  
And she's ill.

ALAYNE  
You can taste that in her blood?

LACROIX NODS, HIS EXPRESSION THOUGHTFUL. VACHON RETURNS TO THEM.

VACHON  
There was no one outside.

LACROIX NODS, UNSURPRISED.

ALAYNE  
Someone should call the police.

SHE DOESN'T SOUND PLEASED BY THE PROSPECT, AND TURNS PLEADING EYES TO VACHON.

ALAYNE (continued)  
Do I have to stay here?

LACROIX  
Of course not.

VACHON LOOKS AT HIM SUSPICIOUSLY, IT'S NOT IN LACROIX'S NATURE TO BE MAGNANIMOUS AND AGREEABLE.

VACHON  
Why?

LACROIX  
There's no need to involve anyone. Make sure it's Nicholas you call.

BEFORE VACHON CAN QUESTION HIM FURTHER, LACROIX TAKES ALAYNE BY THE ARM AND LEADS HER TO THE BAR. VACHON FOLLOWS. LACROIX LOCKS HIS GAZE WITH HERS AND SHE SMILES AS SHE HOLDS UP HER HAND.

ALAYNE  
I know what you are, and I won't forget it. I have no intention of saying anything. Do you still want to try to hypnotise me out of that knowledge?

VACHON LAUGHS QUIETLY AND REACHES BEHIND THE BAR FOR THE PHONE.

LACROIX IS MORE CONCERNED AND WARY THAN ANNOYED BY HER WORDS. HE HESITATES, UNCERTAIN . . .

FADE INTO FLASHBACK

FRANCE -- SMALL PARLOUR

LACROIX AND NICHOLAS WAIT IN A SMALL ROOM, THE FURNISHINGS ARE NEITHER ELABORATE NOR POOR, THE ROOM IS CLUTTERED AND HAS THE FEEL OF MANY VISITORS.

LACROIX

This is madness, Nicholas.

NICHOLAS WHIRLS TO FACE HIS MASTER AND IT'S CLEAR HE IS EXTREMELY ANGRY.

NICHOLAS

I don't recall asking for your company, LaCroix. Why not leave?

LACROIX

And miss your redemption?  
Not a chance, dear boy.

BEFORE NICHOLAS CAN LAUNCH ANOTHER VERBAL ATTACK, A WOMAN JOINS THEM. THIS IS CELESTINE BEAUMONTE -- SHE IS A DEAD RINGER FOR ALAYNE HARRISON. HER MANNER INDICATES THAT SHE IS CLOSE TO NICHOLAS. SHE GREETES HIM WARMLY, AND TURNS A SLIGHTLY WARY GAZE TO LACROIX. NICHOLAS BRINGS HER TO THE VAMPIRE, AND RELUCTANTLY INTRODUCES THE TWO.

NICHOLAS

This is Lucien LaCroix, an old friend. Madame Celestine Beaumonte.

LACROIX KISSES HER HAND, BUT SHE IS NOT CHARMED. QUITE THE OPPOSITE. HER EXPRESSION FLICKERS WITH DISTASTE, THEN ANGER.

CELESTINE

You are responsible for what Nicholas is.

LACROIX NOTES THAT NICHOLAS IS AS STARTLED BY THE OBSERVATION AS HE IS, AND HE SMILES.

LACROIX

What he will remain.

CELESTINE

There is an answer to every mystery, Monsieur LaCroix. We simply have yet to find one for Nicholas.

LACROIX

You're either very brave, or very stupid, Madame. Either way, nothing you do will change what I have given him.

NICHOLAS

You're not welcome here, LaCroix.  
Leave.

WHEN LACROIX CONTINUES TO LOOK AT CELESTINE, HIS EXPRESSION SPECULATIVE, NICHOLAS STEPS IN FRONT OF HER AND BREAKS THE INTENT CONTACT.

LACROIX CONCEDES WITH A NOD, BUT HE APPEARS GENUINELY CONCERNED AS HE LEAVES THEM . . .

FADE OUT OF FLASHBACK

LACROIX IS SEATED BEFORE HIS MICROPHONE, HIS EXPRESSION IS THOUGHTFUL, BUT WORRIED.

CUT TO

INTERIOR -- ALAYNE'S APARTMENT -- THE LIVING ROOM

VACHON IS WITH HER, THE DRAWING TABLE IS CONSPICUOUSLY COVERED. SHE STANDS AT THE WINDOW, AND LOOKS OUT AT THE CITY AS HE WATCHES HER FROM HIS SEAT IN AN ARMCHAIR.

VACHON

You shouldn't have challenged LaCroix, Alayne. He doesn't like it.

ALAYNE LAUGHS QUIETLY AND TURNS TO FACE HIM.

ALAYNE

Is that what I did?

WHEN HE ADMONISHES HER WITH A LOOK, SHE SIGHS AND SITS IN THE CHAIR OPPOSITE HIS.

ALAYNE  
I'm sorry, it probably was  
very stupid. He scares me.

VACHON  
He should.

ALAYNE  
He can't hurt me, Javier. Not  
really.

VACHON SHAKES HIS HEAD.

VACHON  
Don't tempt him to prove how  
wrong you are. He'll enjoy it  
too much.

JAVIER'S LOOK IS DRAWN BACK TO THE COVERED DRAWING BOARD, AND SHE SMILES  
AS SHE NOTICES THAT HE IS GLANCING IN THAT DIRECTION AGAIN.

ALAYNE  
Do you want to look?

HE NODS AND THEY GO TO THE AREA. SHE SNAPS A LIGHT ON AND PULLS ASIDE  
THE SHEET THAT IS DRAPED OVER THE TILTED BOARD. VACHON SIFTS THROUGH THE  
LOOSE SHEETS OF PAPER, SMILES AT THE IMAGES OF HIS OWN FACE, AND SLOWS  
AS HE SEES PORTRAITS OF NICHOLAS, JANETTE, AND SEVERAL OTHERS THAT SHE  
SHOULD NOT KNOW. SHE LOOKS AT HIM CURIOUSLY.

ALAYNE  
Do you know them?

VACHON SHAKES OFF THE MOMENTARY SURPRISE AND SHRUGS.

VACHON  
No. Do you?

ALAYNE  
No. That's the odd part, I  
usually draw people I've seen  
before. But these . . .

SHE TAKES A DRAWING OF NICK FROM HIM.

ALAYNE (continued)  
. . . I know I've never met these  
people. Yet they feel familiar to  
me. Ancient, like echoes from a  
past life.

VACHON ACCEPTS HER WORDS WITHOUT COMMENT, AND SHE SMILES SHYLY AT HIM.  
THE CHANGE IN EXPRESSION SPEAKS ELOQUENTLY OF HER ATTRACTION TO HIM.

END SCENE

=====

FADE IN

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE CORONER'S BUILDING

NICK AND NATALIE ARE IN HER LAB. SHE HANDS HIM ANOTHER OF HER CONCOCTIONS WITH INSTRUCTIONS TO DRINK IT. HE WINCES, BUT DOESN'T PROTEST TOO LOUDLY AS HE TASTES IT HESITANTLY. HE MAKES A FACE AND HANDS IT BACK TO HER.

NICK  
That's the worst one in ages.

NATALIE SIGHS, IGNORES THE OUTBURST, AND INDICATES THAT HE'S TO CONTINUE DRINKING. SHE PICKS UP A FILE AND READS.

NATALIE  
The results are the same. Last night's victim is HIV positive, and she was drugged the same way the others were.

NICK  
That's it?

HE MAKES ANOTHER FACE AT THE CUP, PUTS IT DOWN, AND SMILES WHEN SHE CASTS A PAINED LOOK HIS WAY.

NATALIE  
Actually, no. The drug is a high grade, clinical compound. It's not something you'd find on the street, or at the corner drug store.

NICK  
What's your best guess?

NATALIE  
Hospital, maybe. It's impossible to say. Whoever's using it to kill knows what he's doing, though. The dosages are measured and timed.

NICK  
So we could be looking for someone with medical training? (pause)  
That doesn't narrow it down much.

NATALIE  
No one at The Raven saw what happened?

NICK KNOWS WHO SHE MEANS WHEN SHE REFUSES TO MEET HIS EYES.

NICK  
He's not part of this, Nat.

NATALIE  
I know that, Nick. I just find it difficult to believe anything escapes LaCroix's notice when it's right in front of him.

NICK NODS, KISSES HER TEMPLE, AND LEAVES THE LAB.

CUT TO  
ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

THE CLUB IS ALL BUT DESERTED, ALAYNE HARRISON IS AT THE END OF THE BAR, AND LACROIX APPROACHES HER.

LACROIX  
It would appear you've wasted the entire night waiting for our young friend.

ALAYNE  
Not at all. I wanted to see you.

LACROIX  
Should I be flattered?

ALAYNE  
No. We both know I don't like you any more than you like me.

LACROIX  
So what is it you want?

ALAYNE  
Information.

LACROIX IS AMUSED.

LACROIX  
Why would you assume I'd tell  
you whatever it is you want to  
know?

ALAYNE  
I don't assume that. I live in  
hope.

HER SARCASM EARNS HER A NOD OF MOCKING ADMIRATION.

LACROIX  
Ask away, I'm at your mercy.

ALAYNE LAUGHS NOW.

ALAYNE  
I doubt you've ever been at anyone's  
mercy, but I thank you for the  
compliment.  
(pause)  
How much do you know about me?

LACROIX  
Nothing at all.

ALAYNE  
The truth.

LACROIX LETS HER WAIT AS HE CONTEMPLATES HIS ANSWER, IF HE'LL GIVE HER ONE. HE GOES BEHIND THE BAR AND POURS HIMSELF A DRINK. HE SELECTS PERRIER WATER FOR HER AND PLACES BOTTLE AND GLASS ON THE BAR IN FRONT OF HER.

LACROIX  
You're dying. That's why  
you've been so reckless. You've  
dared a great deal more than  
most mortals would, knowing what  
we are.

ALAYNE  
And do you know what is  
killing me?

LACROIX  
For that I'd have to taste  
your blood, and we don't know  
each other quite that well,  
do we, Alayne?

ALAYNE BRISTLES AT THE INSINUATION IN HIS TONE, AND GLARES WHEN HE LAUGHS AT HER.

ALAYNE  
I have AIDS. It's active  
and I don't expect to have  
a lot more time.

LACROIX IS INDIFFERENT TO HER PLIGHT, AND CONTINUES TO WAIT FOR HER TO MAKE HER POINT.

ALAYNE  
If a vamp . . .  
(deep breath)  
If one of your kind was to  
drink from me, would it be  
harmful?

LACROIX PAUSES AND DRINKS AS SHE SHIFTS ANXIOUSLY ON HER STOOL.

LACROIX  
Your concern is touching, but  
no, we're quite immune to your  
mortal illnesses.  
(pause)  
Does Javier know this is why  
you want him? To cure your  
deadly illness?

LACROIX'S SARDONIC TONE INFURIATES HER AND SHE STANDS.

ALAYNE  
You were right, LaCroix.  
We don't know each other at all.

THE VAMPIRE SHRUGS CARELESSLY AS HE WATCHES HER LEAVE THE CLUB.

CUT TO

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE POLICE STATION

NICK COMES INTO THE SQUAD ROOM AND HEADS DIRECTLY FOR TRACY'S DESK. SHE IS INTENT ON HER COMPUTER SCREEN AND DOESN'T NOTICE HIM AT FIRST. WHEN HE PUTS A HAND ON HER SHOULDER, SHE JUMPS BACK VIOLENTLY.

NICK  
Sorry. How's it going?

TRACY  
Nothing. We've been running  
the composite through the  
system, but so far we haven't  
got a match. Not even a likely  
possibility.

NICK  
Start checking hospital records.  
Natalie thinks we're looking for  
someone with medical background.  
Maybe a technician, or a lab  
specialist.

TRACY  
I can't just tap into those  
kind of records.

NICK KNOWS THAT OF COURSE, AND SMILES BROADLY.

NICK  
So we get a warrant and get  
access.

IT'S MAKE WORK, AND THEY BOTH KNOW IT. IT'S ALSO THE ONLY LEGITIMATE WAY TO GAIN ACCESS TO THE FILES THEY NEED. NICK TURNS TO LEAVE AND IS ONLY A FEW STEPS AWAY WHEN TRACY CALLS OUT TO HIM.

TRACY  
Where are you going?

NICK CONTINUES TO WALK.

NICK  
I have to talk to someone who  
may have seen the guy we're  
looking for.

TRACY IS ON HER FEET, BUT NOT QUICKLY ENOUGH TO CATCH HIM. REESE STOPS HER AS SHE GRITS HER TEETH AND TRIES TO RESIST THE URGE TO KILL SOMETHING.

REESE  
Where's your partner going in  
such a hurry?

TRACY  
How would I know?

REESE LOOKS AT HER, DECIDES NOT TO ASK, AND GOES BACK INTO HIS OFFICE.

CUT TO

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

NICK ENTERS THE BUSY NIGHTCLUB AND SEARCHES THE CROWD FOR LACROIX.  
LACROIX IS BROADCASTING, HALF-HEARTEDLY.

THE MASTER VAMPIRE SPOTS HIM AND FLIPS A SWITCH ON THE CONSOLE IN FRONT OF HIM, THEN JOINS THE KNIGHT AT THE BAR.

LACROIX  
What brings you in tonight, Nicholas?

NICK  
What can you tell me about the man you saw leaving here the other night? Just before Sarah Didion died?

LACROIX SIGHS WEARILY, THEN SMILES.

LACROIX  
And I had so hoped this was a social call.

NICK WAITS, HIS EXPRESSION FAINTLY AMUSED, BUT EXPECTANT JUST THE SAME.

LACROIX  
I told you at the time that I didn't see more than a shadow.

NICK  
That's impossible, and we both know it.

LACROIX'S PATIENCE IS GONE AND HE GLARES AT HIS CHILD.

LACROIX  
Nicholas, if you insist on playing detective, enjoy it. But I have no interest in solving crime, or helping the police. Janette found your little hobby diverting, I assure you, I don't!

NICK PULLS OUT A SHEET OF PAPER AND HANDS IT TO LACROIX.

NICK  
Could it have been this man?

LACROIX EXAMINES THE FACE AND SHRUGS.

LACROIX  
I really don't know, Nicholas.

THE DRAWING REMINDS HIM OF VACHON'S NEW FRIEND, AND HER TALENT.

LACROIX  
You said all the victims were  
HIV positive?

NICK  
That's right. But it's not  
the virus that's killing them.

NICK WATCHES THE THOUGHTFUL EXPRESSION ON LACROIX'S FACE AND HE IS SUSPICIOUS.

NICK  
What is it, LaCroix?

LACROIX  
Nothing. I've told you,  
I don't know if this is the man  
who left so abruptly.

NICK CLEARLY WANTS TO PURSUE THE CONVERSATION FURTHER, BUT HE ALSO KNOWS THAT LACROIX WILL NOT SAY ANYTHING MORE UNTIL HE'S DAMN GOOD AND READY TO.

NICK  
You always did enjoy keeping  
the answers to yourself.

AS NICK STORMS OUT OF THE CLUB, LACROIX'S SMILE FALTERS VERY SLIGHTLY.

FADE INTO FLASHBACK

CELESTINE'S SITTING ROOM

LACROIX IS ALONE IN THE ROOM WHEN CELESTINE ENTERS. SHE CLEARLY HAS BEEN EXPECTING HIM. SHE FROWNS AND KEEPS MOST OF THE SMALL ROOM BETWEEN THEM.

CELESTINE  
Where is Nicholas?

LACROIX  
I'm afraid he won't be coming  
tonight. Or any other night.

CELESTINE  
You know the answer to his  
mystery, don't you? Why do  
you keep him bound in misery  
and darkness?

LACROIX SMILES AT HER EMOTIONAL OUTBURST, AND THE LOVE THAT PROMPTS HER PLEADING. ANOTHER WOMAN WHO WILL DO ANYTHING TO HELP THE FAIR AND NOBLE KNIGHT.

LACROIX  
Nicholas is my business,  
you should never have interfered  
in that, Madame.

CELESTINE IS ABOUT TO RETORT WHEN HER EYES WIDEN DRAMATICALLY AND SHE BACKS UP A STEP AND HITS THE WALL. HER HANDS SHAKE AS SHE RAISES THEM TO HER MOUTH AND STARES IN HORROR AT LACROIX.

LACROIX KNOWS THAT IT IS NOT HIS VAMPIRIC NATURE THAT FRIGHTENS HER, AND THE OBVIOUS TERROR ON HER FACE MAKES HIM UNEASY.

LACROIX  
What do you see?

CELESTINE  
Death.  
(pause)  
Your death.

THERE WAS ENOUGH SINCERE FEAR IN HER EYES AND VOICE TO CONVEY THE TRUTH OF HER OBSERVATIONS. LACROIX IS ENRAGED. HE REACHES HER IN AN INSTANT AND PLACES A LETHAL HAND AROUND HER THROAT, HIS CAREFUL TOUCH EERILY AT ODDS WITH HIS GLOWING EYES AND FANGS.

LACROIX  
Tell me exactly what you see?

CELESTINE  
In return for the answer Nicholas  
seeks.

LACROIX'S LAUGHTER IS CHILLING, AND HE LOCKS HIS GAZE WITH HERS, THE STEADY PULSE OF HER HEARTBEAT ALL BUT DEAFENING HIM AS HIS LOOK BORES INTO HERS. HE RELEASES HER MOMENTS LATER, AND SHE SLUMPS TO THE FLOOR AND STARES HELPLESSLY AT HIM.

CELESTINE  
Can it really be so simple?

LACROIX BENDS AND TUGS HER TO HER FEET. HE SMILES AND STRIKES, FANGS SINKING INTO HER NECK AS SHE TRIES VAINLY TO PUSH HIM AWAY. WHEN SHE IS ALL BUT DEAD, LACROIX WITHDRAWS AND LOOKS INTO HER EYES AGAIN.

LACROIX  
Tell me.

CELESTINE  
Dead . . .

LACROIX IS ANNOYED BY HER VAGUE RESPONSE.

LACROIX  
Now.

CELESTINE  
She will be . . . dead . . .

LACROIX  
An immortal?

CELESTINE IS RAPIDLY SLIPPING INTO DEATH, SHE SHAKES HER HEAD, TRIES TO ORDER HER THOUGHTS. IT IS NOT EASY WHEN ALL SHE FEELS IS TERROR AND REGRET. NICHOLAS WILL NEVER KNOW WHAT LACROIX HAS SHOWN HER.

CELESTINE  
Non. But she will be your end.

LACROIX  
A dead woman who is not dead?

LACROIX LAUGHS AND FINISHES HER OFF.

FADE OUT OF FLASHBACK

END SCENE

FADE IN

ALAYNE'S APARTMENT -- THE BEDROOM

ALAYNE IS IN HER BED WHEN SHE IS AWAKENED BY THE SOUND OF SOMEONE IN THE LIVING ROOM. SHE SLOWLY PUSHES BACK THE SHEETS AND VENTURES TO THE DOOR AND PEERS OUT. SHE SEES A FIGURE STANDING AT HER DRAWING TABLE, AND AS HE TURNS SHE FEELS GENUINE FEAR.

LACROIX LOOKS AT THE PHOTOGRAPHS THAT ADORN THE WALL ABOVE HER WORK AREA. THERE IS A PICTURE OF HER IN NURSE'S UNIFORM, WITH SEVERAL OTHER WOMEN, IN FRONT OF MERCY HOSPITAL. IN HIS HAND IS ONE OF HER SKETCHBOOKS. HE KNOWS SHE IS WATCHING AND BECKONS HER OUT WITH A GESTURE.

ALAYNE RELUCTANTLY ANSWERS THE SUMMONS. AS SHE NEARS HIM, SHE SNATCHES THE BOOK FROM HIS HAND. SHE IS NOT CERTAIN IF HE HAS ACTUALLY SEEN WHAT IS IN THE BOOK OR NOT.

ALAYNE

What are you doing here?

LACROIX

How did you get your illness?

ALAYNE

What?

LACROIX

It's a simple enough question.

ALAYNE

What difference does it make,  
especially to you?

LACROIX

None at all, of course, but it  
may help . . . a friend of mine.

ALAYNE HUGS HER SKETCHBOOK AND PACES THE ROOM FOR A MOMENT.

ALAYNE

I dated the wrong guy. He was  
a med student. A real prize moron  
too, I might add. I think he knew  
he had the virus, and didn't care.

LACROIX

A name, Alayne?

ALAYNE  
I want your help, in return.

LACROIX  
Be very careful what you ask  
for, you may get it.

ALAYNE  
Your advice, then.

LACROIX SHAKES HIS HEAD, A COMBINATION OF AMUSEMENT AND WEARINESS IN HIS MANNER.

ALAYNE  
His name is, or was, Aaron  
Williams. I don't know if he's  
still alive.

WHEN HE SEEKS SATISFIED WITH THAT, SHE PUTS THE BOOK IN A DESK DRAWER AND WALKS TO THE BAR TO POUR HERSELF A DRINK. SHE DOWNS IT, POURS ANOTHER AND TURNS TO FACE HIM.

ALAYNE  
If Javier . . .  
If I was to . . .

LACROIX  
Do you want to be one of us?

ALAYNE (quickly)  
No!

LACROIX'S GAZE SHARPENS, HIS IRRITATION SURFACES.

LACROIX  
Then what is it you do want?

ALAYNE  
For something of what I am to live  
when I'm dead. If he drinks from  
me, is that possible? Will some  
part of who I am stay within him?

LACROIX'S MOOD CHANGES AGAIN, THIS TIME TO OBVIOUS ENJOYMENT.

LACROIX  
Mixing minds with mortals can be  
rather stimulating. Would you like  
to experiment?

ALAYNE BACKS UP A STEP, THE REACTION INVOLUNTARY.

LACROIX GRINS AT HER IN SINCERE AMUSEMENT.

ALAYNE  
Then it's possible?

LACROIX  
I'm told that anything's  
possible, Alayne.

ALAYNE  
Don't you **ever** answer a  
question directly?

LACROIX  
Not if I can help it.  
(beat)  
If Javier chooses to, he can  
keep your mind alive within his  
forever.  
Do you think he wants you that  
much?

ALAYNE  
I don't know.

SHE'S TRULY AFRAID, AND THEY BOTH KNOW IT.

CUT TO

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE POLICE STATION

NICK PUTS DOWN THE PHONE AND TURNS TO THE COMPUTER SCREEN. HE TAPS IN A NAME AND WAITS. TRACY HAS WATCHED THE EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE CHANGE AS HE LISTENED TO WHOEVER CALLED HIM, AND SHE STANDS AND GOES TO LOOK OVER HIS SHOULDER.

TRACY  
Aaron Williams?  
He's on the list we got from  
Mercy Hospital. Why him?

NICK  
An informed tip.

TRACY  
From who?

NICK  
We've got an address, let's go.

BEFORE SHE CAN QUESTION HIM, HE'S ON HIS WAY AGAIN, THIS TIME TRACY KEEPS PACE AND STAYS WITH HIM.

CUT TO

ALAYNE'S APARTMENT -- THE LIVING ROOM

ALAYNE IS ALONE NOW, AND SHE IS CURLED INTO ONE OF THE ARMCHAIRS, HER EYES FOCUSED INWARD AS SHE TRIES TO SORT THROUGH THE THINGS THAT LACROIX HAS TOLD HER. SHE LOOKS SICK AND TIRED, AND VERY FRIGHTENED.

AN INSISTENT KNOCK AT THE DOOR FORCES HER TO STAND AND SHE GOES TO ANSWER IT. SHE PEEPS THROUGH THE HOLE AND SEES NO ONE. THE KNOCKING RESUMES.

ALAYNE  
Who is it?

WILLIAMS  
Aaron.

ALAYNE IS STUNNED. THIS IS THE LAST PERSON SHE EXPECTS TO SEE. CURIOUS, IN SPITE OF HERSELF, SHE OPENS THE DOOR AND LETS HIM IN.

AARON WILLIAMS IS IN VERY BAD SHAPE. HIS EYES ARE CRAZY AND HIS BREATHING IS LABOURED.

ALAYNE  
What are you doing here?

ALAYNE'S HAD A FEW MOMENTS TO RECOVER FROM THE SURPRISE OF SEEING HIM AGAIN, AND ANGER CLOUDS HER FEATURES.

ALAYNE  
You've got nerve, I'll give you that.

WILLIAMS  
I have to finish it. I have to fix it.

ALAYNE  
Fix what?

WILLIAMS DOESN'T ANSWER, HE REACHES INTO HIS POCKET AND PULLS OUT A SYRINGE. HE ADJUSTS THE DOSAGE CAREFULLY AND TAKES A STEP TOWARD HER.

WILLIAMS

You were the hardest one to  
find, Alayne. I can't tell you  
how sorry I am, but I have to be  
sure. I have to fix it.

ALAYNE'S EYES ARE HUGE AS SHE WATCHES HIM APPROACH HER.

ALAYNE

You've been killing them, haven't  
you? Why? For God's sake, Aaron,  
they probably didn't even know. Have  
you lost your mind completely?

CUT TO

ALAYNE'S BEDROOM

JAVIER VACHON IS SEEN ENTERING THROUGH THE WINDOW. HE HEARS WHAT'S GOING  
ON IN THE NEXT ROOM AND GOES TO INVESTIGATE.

CUT TO

LIVING ROOM

ALAYNE IS BACKING TOWARD THE DRAWING TABLE. SHE BUMPS INTO IT AND THE  
PORTRAITS SPILL TO THE FLOOR. AARON'S ATTENTION IS DIVERTED, AND HE  
STARES DUMBFOUNDED AT THE FAMILIAR FACES THAT STARE UP AT HIM. ALL THE  
FACES SEEM TO ACCUSE HIM, AND CRY OUT FOR VENGEANCE.

WILLIAMS

How did you know?

HIS VOICE IS WILD AND HE LUNGES FOR ALAYNE.

VACHON INTERCEPTS WILLIAMS AND EASILY FLINGS HIM ASIDE. AARON SPRAWLS  
ON THE FLOOR AND VACHON EMBRACES THE SHUDDERING ALAYNE.

AS VACHON COMFORTS ALAYNE, WILLIAMS BEGINS TO MAKE HIS WAY TOWARD THE  
DOOR.

ALAYNE IS TORN BETWEEN THE NEED TO TELL VACHON WHO WILLIAMS IS, AND THE  
DESIRE TO REMAIN IN HIS ARMS, COMFORTED, SAFE.

ALAYNE

I don't want to die, Javier.

VACHON

I know . . . I know.

WILLIAMS GETS TO HIS FEET AND RUNS.

ALAYNE  
Let him go!

VACHON LETS HIM GO.

ALAYNE  
Stay with me.

VACHON  
I can't do that, Alayne.

ALAYNE  
Why? Is there someone . . .

VACHON  
No, it's not like that.

ALAYNE  
Then what? I know what you are, and I know what you can give me.

VACHON  
You don't want what I can give you, Alayne.

ALAYNE  
Yes, I do.

FOR A LONG MOMENT, INDECISION DOMINATES VACHON'S HANDSOME FACE, THEN HE SHAKES HIS HEAD. HE KISSES HER FOREHEAD, THEN HOLDS HER FACE BETWEEN HIS HANDS.

ALAYNE  
Please, Javier?  
Let me explain. I haven't got a lot of time left. I don't want all of it to be lost.

VACHON  
Think about what you're asking me to do.  
(holds up a hand to still her protest)  
Think about it, be sure, and we'll talk about it again.  
(smiles)  
I promise.

HE KISSES HER AGAIN, VERY GENTLY, THEN EASES AWAY FROM HER. BEFORE HE HEADS FOR THE DOOR, HE BENDS TO PICK UP THE SYRINGE WILLIAMS DROPPED, AND HE WRAPS IT IN A SHEET OF ALAYNE'S DRAWING PAPER BEFORE TUCKING IT IN HIS POCKET. AS HE REACHES THE DOOR, HE LOOKS BACK AND SMILES REASSURANCE. THEN HE'S GONE.

END SCENE

=====

FADE IN

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- MERCY HOSPITAL

NICK AND TRACY ARE TALKING TO A NURSE IN PERSONNEL, SHE LOOKS WORRIED BY THEIR QUESTIONS, AND WHAT SHE HAS TO TELL THEM.

NURSE

Aaron Williams was one of the best residents this hospital's ever had.

NICK

He may be responsible for several deaths. We need to find him.

NURSE

I find that impossible to . . .

TRACY

Was he involved with anyone during his residency?

NURSE

He was engaged to a nurse.

NICK

Her name?

NURSE

Alayne Harrison. But she moved away a couple of years ago. She broke the engagement and just disappeared.

TRACY

Do you have any idea where we might find Williams now?

NURSE

No. I'm sorry.

NICK IS FURIOUS AT THE DEAD ENDS THEY KEEP RUNNING INTO.

TRACY  
Thanks for your help.

BEFORE NICK CAN MAKE A CRYPTIC COMMENT, SHE STEERS HIM AWAY FROM THE DESK.

TRACY  
Their last known is the same as ours. So, what do we do now?

BEFORE HE CAN ANSWER, TRACY'S CELL PHONE RINGS. SHE FLIPS IT OPEN AND HER EXPRESSION IS TRIUMPHANT WHEN SHE SNAPS IT SHUT MOMENTS LATER AND LOOKS AT NICK.

TRACY  
C'mon, partner. I think we just got a break.

AS THEY REACH THE PARKING LOT AND GET INTO THE CADDY, NICK WAITS FOR HER TO ELABORATE.

TRACY  
Head for The Raven. We need to see someone.

NICK DOESN'T LOOK HAPPY TO HAVE THIS LEAD BACK TO THE RAVEN AGAIN, BUT THERE'S LITTLE CHOICE. HE HEADS FOR THE NIGHTCLUB.

CUT TO

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

URS AND VACHON ARE AT THE BAR, LACROIX IS ABSENT. VACHON APPEARS BROODING, AND URS WATCHES HIM CLOSELY. SHE IS STANDING AT HIS BACK, HER HAND TOYING WITH HIS HAIR.

VACHON IS OBLIVIOUS TO HER FOR THE MOST PART, AND WATCHES THE ENTRANCE.

URS  
Is what she's asking so hard for you?

VACHON  
I thought you wanted what I gave you.

URS  
If she knows what you are, then  
she knows exactly what you can  
give her. Maybe you should  
trust her to know what she wants?

VACHON  
I don't think she knows what  
she wants. She's terrified.

NICK AND TRACY ENTER THE RAVEN. NICK DELIBERATELY LINGERS IN THE BACKGROUND, HIS EYES SEARCH THE CLUB FOR LACROIX.

URS GLIDES AWAY AS TRACY APPROACHES VACHON.

TRACY  
You've seen Williams.

VACHON SMILES IRONICALLY.

VACHON  
Nice to see you again, too,  
Detective Vetter.

NICK SMIRKS BEHIND THEM.

VACHON REACHES INTO HIS POCKET AND TAKES OUT THE SYRINGE.

VACHON  
He went after a friend of mine  
tonight. He left this behind.

TRACY IS STUNNED AND GINGERLY ACCEPTS THE NEEDLE.

TRACY  
Can we talk to your friend?

VACHON  
I'd rather you didn't.

NICK STEPS FORWARD.

NICK  
That may not be optional if  
we can't find this guy.

VACHON  
So find him.

WHEN KNIGHT SEEMS READY TO SNARL AT VACHON, TRACY STEPS BETWEEN THEM.

TRACY

We're trying to do precisely  
that. Do you have any idea --

VACHON

Where you can find him?  
(pause)  
No. But neither does she.

TRACY

She?

IS TRACY FEELING A TWINGE OF JEALOUSY?

VACHON

I don't think he has much time  
left from the look of him.

NICK

Why'd you let him leave? For  
that matter why didn't you call us?

VACHON

She asked me not to.

NICK

Your friend wouldn't happen  
to be Alayne Harrison?

VACHON'S EXPRESSION REVEALS NOTHING, AND TRACY STARES IN SURPRISE AT HER PARTNER. SHE LOOKS UNEASY AS THE TWO MEN SILENTLY WATCH EACH OTHER FOR SEVERAL MORE MOMENTS. NICK BREAKS THE CONTACT FIRST AND TAKES TRACY BY THE ARM.

NICK

C'mon, Tracy, we have to  
get this to Natalie.

TRACY DOESN'T OBJECT AS HE LEADS HER FROM THE CLUB, BUT SHE DOES CAST A BACKWARD GLANCE AT VACHON, HER CURIOSITY WRITTEN ALL OVER HER FACE.

END SCENE

FADE IN

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE CORONER'S BUILDING

NATALIE LOOKS UP AS THE TWO DETECTIVES COME INTO HER LAB. SHE IS AT HER COMPUTER TERMINAL AND QUICKLY LEAVES IT TO SCOOP A FILE FROM HER DESK.

NATALIE

You were right, it's a  
match to the drug that's  
been killing your victims.

NICK READS THE FILE.

NATALIE

Does one of you want to tell  
me where you found this little  
piece of rather damning evidence?

TRACY

A friend.

NATALIE ACCEPTS THE EVASIVE ANSWER WITH A SHRUG.

NATALIE

Okay . . . Next question.  
Any idea who you're looking  
for?

NICK

Aaron Williams is the name  
we've come up with, but so  
far we haven't been able to  
locate him.

NATALIE

Aaron Williams?

THE TONE OF HER VOICE MAKES IT CLEAR SHE KNOWS WHO THEY'RE LOOKING FOR,  
AND IS SURPRISED BY THE NEWS.

NICK

You know this guy?

NATALIE

I did some work at an AIDS hospice a few months ago. He was a patient there, but he used to be a doctor. He helped treat some of the more serious cases. He knew he had nothing to lose by being in close contact.

SHE LOOKS UPSET, AND NICK AND TRACY LOOK UNCOMFORTABLE.

NICK

We're pretty sure he's responsible for what's been happening, Natalie.

SHE DOESN'T ANSWER, BUT HER EYES ARE HUGE WITH REMORSE, AND SYMPATHY.

NICK

Where's the clinic, Nat?

SHE GOES TO HER DESK AND SIFTS THROUGH SOME OF THE PAPERS THAT LITTER THE AREA. WHEN SHE FINDS THE CARD SHE'S LOOKING FOR, SHE HANDS IT OVER WITHOUT A WORD.

NICK HESITATES, WHISPERS A THANK YOU TO HER, THEN HE AND TRACY LEAVE.

CUT TO

ALAYNE'S APARTMENT -- THE BEDROOM

ALAYNE IS ASLEEP IN HER BED.

AS SHE SLEEPS, WE SEE THAT SHE IS NOT ALONE, SHE IS BEING JOINED BY SOMEONE. A HAND TOUCHES HER SHOULDER, DRAWS THE SHEETS DOWN IN A GENTLE CARESSING MOTION. AS THE HAND PASSES INTO THE MOONLIGHT, WE SEE THE HEAVY SILVER RING THAT IDENTIFIES LACROIX.

AS ALAYNE WAKES SHE SMILES SLEEPILY AND TURNS TOWARD THE MAN AT HER BACK. SHE CLEARLY EXPECTS TO FIND VACHON, AND ALMOST BOLTS FROM THE BED WHEN SHE FINDS HERSELF LOOKING INTO LACROIX'S EYES.

LACROIX HOLDS HER FIRMLY AGAINST THE MATTRESS AND SHE BEGINS TO STRUGGLE WITH HIM.

ALAYNE

What are you doing here?!

LACROIX LAUGHS, SINCERELY AMUSED.

LACROIX  
Granting you your last wish.

ALAYNE IS TRULY TERRIFIED NOW AND FIGHTS FRANTICALLY TO ESCAPE HIM. SHE IS HELPLESS, THOUGH, AND KNOWS IT.

LACROIX SLAMS HER HARD INTO THE PILLOWS AND PULLS BACK THE SHEETS AS HE SETTLES OVER HER TWISTING BODY. HE COVERS HER MOUTH WITH HIS AND SHE GROANS IN DENIAL . . .

CUT TO  
THE CLINIC/HOSPICE

NICK AND TRACY ARE ASKING THE ATTENDANT WHERE THEY CAN FIND AARON WILLIAMS. THE MAN IS NOT BEING PARTICULARLY HELPFUL, AND NICK IS LOSING PATIENCE QUICKLY.

TRACY IS LOOKING AROUND, SCANNING THE FACES OF THE FEW PATIENTS WHO ARE MILLING IN THE HALLS.

WILLIAMS SPOTS HER, SEES THE RECOGNITION IN HER FACE, AND RUNS.

HE DISAPPEARS INTO A STAIRWELL AND HEADS UP.

TRACY DRAWS HER GUN AND IS AFTER HIM. NICK IS ON HER HEELS. SHE HAS ENOUGH OF A HEAD START THAT SHE IS ABLE TO CHASE WILLIAMS UP TWO FLIGHTS BEFORE HE WHIRLS AND STARES AT HER WITH PANICKED EYES. HE IS PANTING HEAVILY AND WEAK.

WILLIAMS FORCES HIMSELF TO MOVE AND MANAGES TO STAY A FEW STEPS AHEAD OF TRACY. AT THE TOP OF THE THIRD FLIGHT, HE FALLS AND WHEN SHE REACHES THE LANDING, HE TRIPS HER AND SENDS HER TUMBLING DOWN THE STAIRS. HER GUN GOES SAILING FROM HER HAND.

WILLIAMS TAKES A DEEP BREATH AND TACKLES WHAT HE KNOWS TO BE THE FINAL FLIGHT OF STAIRS THAT WILL LEAD HIM TO THE ROOF.

CUT TO  
THE ROOFTOP OF THE CLINIC  
NICK KNIGHT WAITS, EYES GLOWING, FANGS EXTENDED.

CUT TO  
ALAYNE'S APARTMENT -- THE BEDROOM

LACROIX AND ALAYNE ARE ON THE BED, AND SHE IS ENTWINED IN HIS ARMS. HE RAISES HIS HEAD AND WE SEE THE VAMPIRE POISED TO STRIKE. HE LOWERS HIS MOUTH TO HER NECK AND SHE CRIES OUT, HER EYES CLOSE AND IT'S CLEAR FROM HER EXPRESSION THAT SHE IS FEELING AS MUCH PLEASURE AS PAIN. TEARS SLIP FROM HER EYES AND HER FINGERS CURL INTO FISTS AS SHE CLINGS UNWILLINGLY TO LACROIX.

END SCENE

FADE IN

THE ROOF OF THE CLINIC

NICK GRABS WILLIAMS AS HE BURSTS THROUGH THE DOOR THAT LEADS ONTO THE ROOF THEN CARELESSLY FLINGS HIM FURTHER OUT ONTO THE OPEN SPACE.

CUT TO

THE STAIRWELL

TRACY IS STAGGERING TO HER FEET, LIMPING SLIGHTLY. SHE WINCES, CHECKS FOR HER GUN, WHICH WENT FLYING IN THE FALL, FINDS IT, AND HEADS UPWARD.

CUT TO

THE ROOFTOP

AARON COWERS BEFORE NICK, AND KNIGHT HOLDS BACK, RELUCTANT TO DESTROY SOMEONE SO OBVIOUSLY HELPLESS.

NICK

Why?

• WILLIAMS  
I had to. I had to make it right. I had to fix it. It's my fault. I should have known sooner. I couldn't let them kill other people the way I did them.

NICK DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. IN AN INSANE WAY, THERE'S LOGIC, BUT IT DOESN'T NEGATE THE DEATHS OF PEOPLE WHO MIGHT NEVER HAVE DIED THE WAY WILLIAMS ASSUMES THEY WOULD.

NICK

So you killed them instead.

WILLIAMS

I had to!

WILLIAMS IS BABBLING, REPEATING HIS ASSERTIONS OVER AND OVER, TRYING DESPERATELY TO JUSTIFY WHAT HE'S DONE. HE LOOKS NEAR DEATH HIMSELF. HE KEEPS SAYING THERE'S ONE MORE, HE HAS TO TAKE CARE OF ALAYNE, THEN HE'LL BE ABLE TO DIE IN PEACE.

NICK RUNS A HAND THROUGH HIS HAIR, TORN BETWEEN PITY AND ANGER.

TRACY EMERGES FROM THE DOORWAY, ASSESSES THE SITUATION, AND HOLSTERS HER GUN.

BEHIND THEM, THE STAFF DOCTOR STEPS ONTO THE ROOF. HE APPROACHES NICK.

DOCTOR  
Detective Knight? I'm Roger Hartling, I run this facility. Aaron has less than a month by my estimation.

NICK KNOWS WHAT HE'S BEING TOLD, AND HE HATES IT. TRACY SHARES HIS FEELING.

CUT TO

ALAYNE'S APARTMENT -- LIVING ROOM

VACHON CALLS HER NAME, RECEIVES NO ANSWER, THEN ENTERS THE BEDROOM.

ALAYNE IS LYING ON THE BED, NAKED, SHEETS TANGLED AROUND HER. HER HEAD IS TURNED TO ONE SIDE, AND IT'S EASY TO SEE THE MARKS OF LACROIX'S POSSESSION. BLOOD TRICKLES FROM THE TWIN PUNCTURES.

VACHON HEARS THE FAINT PULSE OF HER HEART, SHE IS VERY CLOSE TO DEATH.

VACHON CROSSES THE ROOM AND SITS ON THE EDGE OF THE BED. HE KNOWS WHO'S DONE THIS TO HER. HE CHEWS HIS BOTTOM LIP FOR A MOMENT, THEN SMILES, SADLY.

VACHON  
You asked me to help you.  
I'll help you now, Alayne.

END SCENE

=====

FADE IN

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE POLICE STATION

NICK AND TRACY ARE SEATED AT THEIR DESKS. NATALIE IS PERCHED ON THE CORNER OF NICK'S AND HER EXPRESSION IS UNDERSTANDING.

CAPTAIN REESE JOINS THEM.

REESE  
Has anyone been able to track down Alayne Harrison?

NICK  
We think she's dead.

REESE  
Do we know that for sure?

NICK  
No!

THE TONE EARNS HIM AN ADMONISHING LOOK FROM NATALIE, AND HE SMILES APOLOGETICALLY AT REESE.

REESE  
What about Williams?

TRACY  
Doctor Hartling has taken him back to the clinic.  
Unfortunately, he'll probably be dead long before this gets to court.

IT'S A MOST UNSATISFACTORY CONCLUSION AND ALL OF THEM KNOW IT.

REESE SIGHS HEAVILY.

REESE  
Find out about Alayne.

TRACY  
Why?

NATALIE  
In case she doesn't know what she's carrying.

WHEN REESE LEAVES THEM WITH A NOD, TRACY STANDS AND HEADS FOR RECORDS. NATALIE LOOKS DOWN AT NICK, WORRY IN HER MANNER.

NATALIE  
Do you know where Alayne Harrison is?

NICK  
I have a hunch I know someone who does.

NATALIE  
Shouldn't we --

NICK SHAKES HIS HEAD.

NICK  
No, she knows.

NATALIE IS PUZZLED, BUT REMAINS SILENT IN THE FACE OF HIS SADNESS.

CUT TO

ESTABLISHING SHOT -- THE RAVEN

LACROIX SITS ALONE IN THE NIGHTCLUB.

HE DRINKS THOUGHTFULLY AND OPENS THE SKETCHBOOK THAT IS ON THE BARTOP. ALAYNE'S WORK FILLS THE PAGES, BUT THE PORTRAITS ARE OF PEOPLE LACROIX KNOWS, PEOPLE SHE HAD NEVER KNOWN. JANETTE SMILES FROM ONE PAGE, AND LACROIX TURNS TO THE NEXT ONE, NICHOLAS, LONG HAIR FLUTTERING IN AN UNSEEN BREEZE, DRESSED AS A CRUSADER KNIGHT. FURTHER INTO THE BOOK ARE THE PAGES THAT UNSETTLED LACROIX THE MOST, SELINE, HIS WIFE, BURIED WITH POMPEII, AND DIVIA, WHO HAD MADE HIM AS ETERNAL AS THE CITY HE HAD LOVED SO DEARLY.

CELESTINE'S VOICE IS HEARD IN THE BACKGROUND AS HE TURNS THE FINAL PAGE.

CELESTINE (voice over)  
She will be . . . dead . . .

SCRAWLED ACROSS THE BOTTOM OF THE PAGE IS ALAYNE'S SIGNATURE, 'DEYJA' -- 'DEAD'.

THE FINAL PICTURE IS LACROIX, A STAKE PROTRUDING FROM HIS HEART. THE HAND THAT WIELDS THE LETHAL BLOW BELONGS TO ALAYNE HARRISON, DRESSED AS SHE HAD BEEN WHEN LACROIX HAD FIRST MET HER -- IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CLOTHES worn by CELESTINE BEAUMONTE . . .

CUT TO

EXTERIOR -- THE RAVEN

VACHON TALKS QUIETLY WITH A WOMAN IN THE ALLEY.

VACHON  
You have to go, before he  
knows what's happened.

HIS EDICT IS MET BY SILENCE. FRUSTRATION CLOUDS HIS FACE, THEN HE FLIES INTO THE NIGHT.

ALAYNE HARRISON STEPS FROM THE SHADOWS . . .

FADE OUT

THE END



Dempsey

## *The Beast Within*

*by Lisa Savignano*

How long has it been since I felt human?  
Since I felt as if I truly lived?  
Too long. Much too long.  
For my beast is what sets me apart.

It lives inside me, always waiting.  
And its hunger cannot be denied,  
from the first faint stirrings in my stomach,  
to the burning delirium that makes hells of my nights.

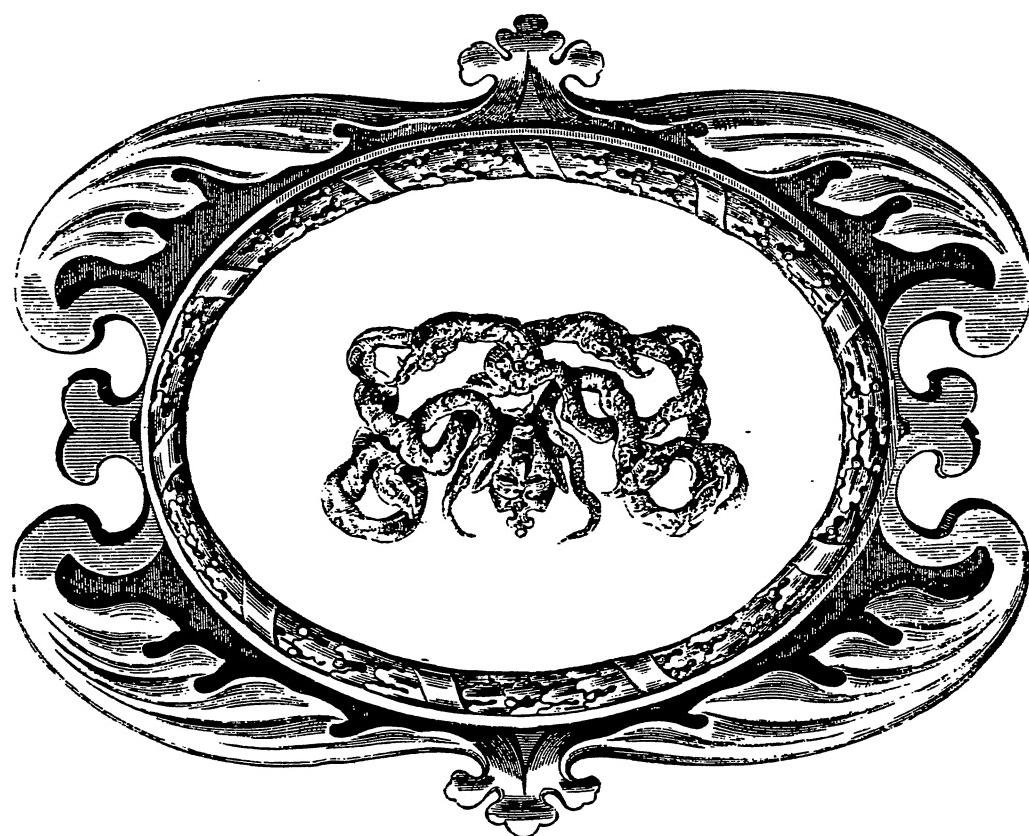
I wander the streets as in a daze,  
fighting the urge to sate my thirst.  
Hungering, longing...but turning away,  
tasting the blood seeping through my clenched teeth.

Even when I am full, he cannot be silenced.  
*Why deny yourself?*, he whispers.  
The taste of blood haunts my mouth  
and I am left shaking with need and unwanted longing.

Every night I fight this beast inside me,  
but I fear that soon I'll fail at last  
and be tempted to reach out, to touch;  
to take... to use... to destroy.

I have no friends, I push them from me,  
for friends are what the beast likes most.  
*Easy prey*, he calls them, for they trust me  
but I cannot be trusted and so I am alone.

You cannot care what happens to me,  
in the constant battle I must face.  
But one day I must give in to my beast  
and pray I'm not outside your window when I do.



## **FROM DIVIA IN THE TOMB**

*by Michelle Christian*

*I lie here in the tomb you sealed me into  
Centuries stretching before and after me  
With nothing but the loneliness to keep me company.  
My father, the great general,  
The terror of the gauls.  
All I did was ask you to love me,  
Ask for you to be everything to me  
And for me to be everything to you.  
But you turned away from me in disgust.  
Did they turn away from you like that  
Those wounded on the gallic fields  
As they watched what you did to their dead and  
Knew that's what awaited them.  
I thought you loved me, but how could you do this  
To your own child, the one who gave you life?  
You said I was evil, but what about what you did?  
Your heart is just as black as mine,  
Your soul is just as empty.  
But you lack imagination.  
I'll show you what evil and imagination can  
Do together, Lucius, one day.  
Some day, I'll see you in the grave.*



**PLEASE TEAR OUT AND RETURN THIS SURVEY! RESULTS WILL APPEAR IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS!**

**I. What are your five favorite stories in this issue, in order of preference?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**II. What were your three favorite pieces of art in this issue(excluding the cover)? Please identify by page number and artist or name of story being illustrated, and list in order of preference.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**III. What were your three favorite poems in this issue, order of preference? (Please include page number)**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**IV. Were there any stories, pieces of art, or poetry in this issue that you just did not like at all?  
(Answers to this question will not be published.)**

**V. Would you prefer that the next issue have double columns, or remain formatted as in the current issue? Type size would remain the same.**

Double columns       As in this issue

**VI. What do you think of the type size in this issue?**

Too small       Just right       Too large

**VI. Is there any particular fandom that you would like to see in the next issue that wasn't included in this one?**

**VII. About how much of this issue have you read?**

One quarter or less     About half    At least 3/4     All \_\_\_\_\_

**VI. Name, address, and email address if you have one (Optional):**

**(OVER, PLEASE)**

VI. Please answer the following question only if you have seen at least two volumes of Good Guys Wear Fangs (Write N/A for "not applicable" by covers you have not seen.):

Which front cover is your favorite so far? Please rank in order of preference.

Volume 1, Rick Springfield as Nick Knight from the original tv movie of that name, by Christine Haire (ink with colored pencil)

Volume 2, Nick and Natalie from Forever Knight, by Michele West (chalk)

Volume 3, Michael Praed as Max Schreck, Son of Darkness, by Christine Haire (ink with colored pencil)

VII. Please rate the front and back covers of the current issue on a scale of 1 to 10, one being the worst score, and 10 being the best:

Front cover: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Back cover: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

VIII. How did you feel about the price of this issue?

I got a lot for my money!

It cost about what I'd expect to pay.

It was overpriced.

IX. Please rate the current issue Of Good Guys Wear Fangs on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the worst, and 10 being the best:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

XI. How likely are you likely to buy the next volume of Good Guys Wear Fangs?

Not likely       Somewhat likely       Very likely

XIII. If you have read previous volumes, please rank Volumes 1-3 in order of preference:

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

XIV. What did you like most and least about this issue? What suggestions for improvement do you have? Why did you like previous volumes more or less than this one?

(THANK YOU FOR FILLING OUT THIS SURVEY!)  
(Over, please)

GRYPHON PRESS PROUDLY PRESENTS:

"THE COLLECTED NICHOLAS AND VARINA"

"THE STRANGERS"

Nicholas and Varina Tannek take refuge in a Tunnel World beneath New York City.  
[published in A DIFFERENT DREAM]



"THE FELLOWSHIP"

A secret Brotherhood of vampires threatens the safety of the Tanneks and the Tunnel World.  
[published in MEMORY FLAME II]

"QUEEN OF THE NIGHT"

An ailing Mozart is befriended by a mysterious doctor and his beautiful wife.  
Co-author Cheryl Duval.  
[published in FADED ROSES #3]

"TO KILL A VAMPIRE"

Sam Beckett leaps into Nicholas Tannek, a wealthy physician who is also a-- vampire?!  
[published in TIME KNIGHT]

"THE SINGING SENORITA" Don Diego de la Vega is enchanted by the traveling noblewoman with the magnificent voice. Her companion is a deadringer for de la Vega, confusing not only the inhabitants of the Pueblo de Los Angeles, but also a vampire hunter on Tannek's trail.  
[published in ZORRO, BLADE OF JUSTICE]

"DR. TANNEK & MR. HYDE" The Tanneks befriend Henry Jekyll during his experiments with a formula to separate Man's good and evil natures. Unfortunately, they also encounter London's most famous murderer-- Jack the Ripper.  
[previously unpublished]

"VAMPIRE KNIGHT" London, 1349 AD, and the Great Pestilence raging across Europe has reached England's shores, causing widespread panic. 400-year-old vampire Nicholas Tannek meets Varina Thanos and his life takes a dramatic turn.  
[excerpt from in-progress novel]

"ON THE COLD HILL'S SIDE" Alternate timeline! Nicholas, Varina and Liam O'Connell encounter Robin of Sherwood and his band. A vampire is terrorizing Nottingham, and the Tanneks must stop her.  
Co-author Rebecca Ann Brothers.  
[published in TURN OF THE WHEEL]

FULL COLOR COVER BY MICHELE WEST!! Interior art by Michele West, Cathy Schlein, Dragon.

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OR: Gryphon Press, c/o Diana Smith/Pat Dunn, 5985 Yukon St #5, Arvada, CO 80004-5736

# "Good Guys Wear Fangs!"

## QUANTUM LEAP MEETS The Vampire Files

956

**NICHOLAS & MARINA** are a delightful vampire couple created by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn. He looks like Duncan Regehr of *Zorro*, and she looks like Marina Sirtis of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In the following stories, they meet some of our favorite television heroes:

**COLUMBO** can't quite believe what his eyes are telling him as he investigates a gruesome murder committed by a self-styled "vampire-killer" who is stalking Nicholas. Art by Cheryl Duval.

**MAGGIEVER** can't quite figure out what to do with the situation when he meets a beautiful lady vampire who takes him in hand and insists that she is there to help save him from Hurdoc's latest diabolical plan! Art by Derrin.

Finally, Barnabas Collins of the new **DARK SHADOWS** has a real reason to believe that there is hope when an ancient witch as powerful as Angelique takes her on head to head! (Guest starring Liara the Irish Witch, created by Valerie Meachum) Art by Valerie Meachum and Derrin.

**CATCHING CAT**, by Athan Y. Chilton, is the lyrically beautiful tale of Paul Leluvo, gypsy and musician, who must die in order to find the true nature of love and immortal life with the mysterious woman who loves him. Art by Athan Y. Chilton.

In an eerily written tale with a classic vampiric flavor, **STINGRAY** must face his greatest challenge when he awakens to find himself transformed... Don't miss **BLACK DAWN**, by Laurie Keeper, editor of the **STINGRAY** fanzines *Small Favors* and *More Small Favors*. Art by Peggy Spaulding.

**INCUBADULA**, by professional author Margaret Carter is a tale of a graduate student who meets again an old friend who wants her to help him steal a very rare book from the antiquities room of the university library. What secret is he hiding, and why has he always kept her at arms length? This one grabs the reader and just won't let go! Art by Barb Johnson.

**INSTINCT** and **CHOICES** are two **NICK KNIGHT/STARSKY & HUTCH** tales by D.N. Fish. In the first, Starsky and Hutch can't figure out just exactly what is so strange about Detective Nick Knight... In the second, Hutch is viciously attacked by a rogue vampire, and Nick and Starsky must help him make the most difficult decision of his life!

The year is 1956. Sam Beckett has leaped into the life of Charles Escott, A Chicago detective with a most unusual partner—vampire Jack Fleming. Before the night is out, Sam must prevent Escott's murder and Fleming's sudden disappearance!

**PARTNERS IN TIME**, a novella by Vampire Files author P.M. Elrod, was specially written to launch the 1st issue of the fanzine **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS**. Edited by Fan-Q nominee Mary Ann McKinnon, this zine will feature original works and crossover stories from your favorite TV series. If you like a good vampire tale, this is the zine for you!

Plus

In **EXODUS**, by award-winning **Robin of Sherwood** writer Janet P. Reedman, Max Schreck from **SON OF DARKNESS** awakens from the discarnate state in Rumania, where he is found and nursed back to health by Stefan of Castle Vladislav, whom we first met in **SUBSPECIES**. When Stefan and his lady are kidnapped by Stefan's evil brother Radu, Max must face the Iron Woods and the evil witch Avestitsa as he and his traveling companion seek to free his new-found friends. Art by Frances Quinn.

In **APRIL'S DREAM**, by Jack Summers, a young vampire woman from Marsh Hollow deep in the Appalachians seeks to find some contact with human life other than the death and destruction indiscriminantly dealt out by her family. Art by T.J. Glenn.

A **CURSE IN TIME** is the tale of inept Vampire Hunter Martin Planting, and how the vampire always gets the girl. A **SON OF DARKNESS/ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** crossover by Sharon Wells. Art by Sharon Wells.

Plus **NICK KNIGHT** tales by Cheryl L. Connors and M.H. Burchett that put him on the job in Los Angeles, and **IN THE BEGINNING**, a terrifying account by Lisa Savignano of **NICK's** -- and LaCroix's -- blood-soaked origins as vampires in the deep, impenetrable jungles of South America.

Finally, there are original vampire tales by Rachel Kadushin, Lyle MacDougall, and Diana Smith and Pat Dunn; poetry by Janet P. Reedman and Judith Conley; and an essay by Margaret Carter defining just what is a good guy vampire and providing an overview of the literature in the field.

Color front cover of **NICK KNIGHT** by Chris Haire. Color back cover of Michael Praed from **SON OF DARKNESS** by Barb Johnson. Approximately 250 pages.

QUANTUM LEAP © Belisarius Productions, VAMPIRE FILES © P.M. Elrod

Available at Media West Con from Bill Hupe in the Orphan Zine Room, or from Bill at 916 Lamb Rd., Mason, MI 48854. \$23.00 postpaid.  
Volumes 2 and 3 also available. SASE for further information information.

Submissions to: Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 204 Blunk, Plymouth MI 48170, email=MaryAnnMc@aol.com.

# **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2**

*Do you like for the guy in fangs to be the hero rather than the villain? Do you find blood-drinking lovers of the night romantic rather than horrific? Then this is the zine for you!*

Modeled in the tradition inspired by such "good guy" vampires as tv's **FOREVER KNIGHT** and P.N. Elrod's **JACK FLEMING** mysteries, the second issue of **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS** has seven stories featuring **FOREVER KNIGHT** or its predecessor **NICK KNIGHT**, plus **MIAMI VICE**, **MACGYVER**, the new **DARK SHADOWS**, **STAR TREK**, **STAR TREK: TNG**, **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD**, **STINGRAY**, the FOX tv movie **BLOOD TIES**, Michael Praed's vampire role **TO DIE FOR 2: SON OF DARKNESS**, **PHOENIX**, and original characters, including the delightfully philanthropic vampire couple **NICHOLAS AND VARINA** (She looks like Marina Sirtis of ST:TNG and he looks like Duncan Regehr of ZORRO.)

Please note that Janet P. Reedman's **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD/SON OF DARKNESS** crossover won the **MAJOR OAK AWARD** for "Best Long Story in Robin of Sherwood Fandom." It's a wonderful story, and there's no need to have seen the series to enjoy it. :-)

**GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2** is edited by Fan Q nominee Mary Ann B. McKinnon and is approximately 400 pages long. It has a **COLOR FRONT COVER** of Nick and Natalie from **FOREVER KNIGHT** by Michele West, and a color back cover of **NICHOLAS AND VARINA** by Barb Johnson. \$26.00 postpaid.

**GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1** is also available, \$23.00 postpaid, approximately, 300 pages, color front cover of **NICK KNIGHT** and color back cover of Michael Praed as he appeared in **TO DIE FOR 2: SON OF DARKNESS**. (This issue includes the **QUANTUM LEAP/JACK FLEMING** crossover by **JACK FLEMING/VAMPIRE FILES** creator P.N. Elrod.) Send me a SASE with a note if you would like a full flyer.

**GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2** is rated R; **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1** is rated PG-13.

Available at the Orphan Zine Table at Media West or order from: Bill Hupe, 916 Lamb Rd., Mason, Mi. 48854.

For submission information or for any questions, send a note and SASE to Mary Ann McKinnon, 254 Blunk, Plymouth, MI 48170 or contact me by email at [MaryAnnMc@aol.com](mailto:MaryAnnMc@aol.com).

## **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 3**

will debut Memorial Day at Media West Con!  
(*SASE or email for a detailed flyer when it becomes available*)

Over a thousand years ago he was Richard d'Orleans, champion of Normandy.  
Then he was Lancelot, Arthur's greatest knight.  
Now he's Richard Dun, a security specialist in modern Toronto.  
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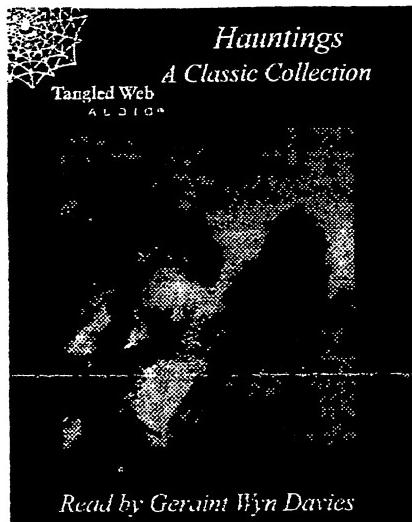
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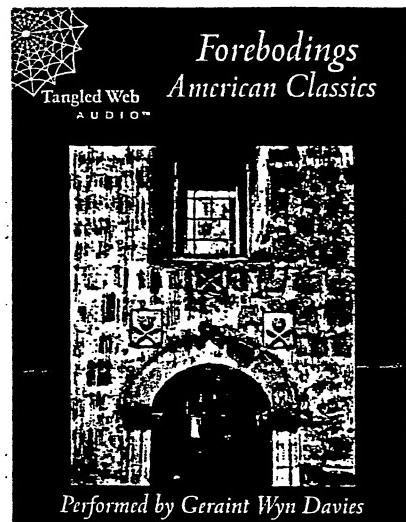
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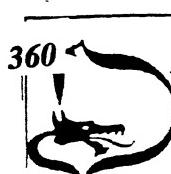
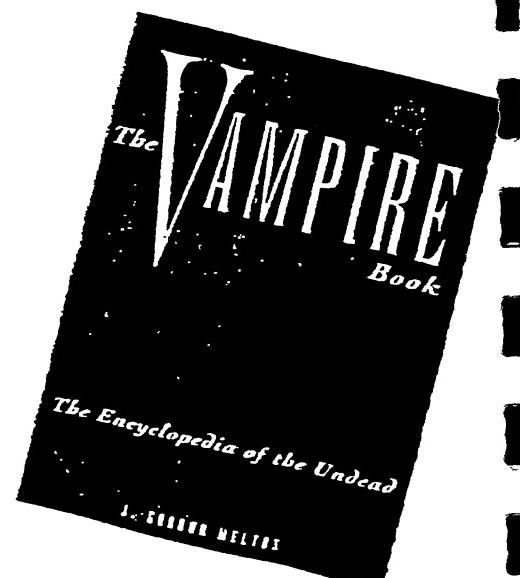
On our way to England we will stop in Dublin to visit this quaint city to see the haunts of Dracula's creator, Bram Stoker, hosted by members of the Bram Stoker Society, and then on to Whitby, one of the most beautiful towns in northern England. While in Whitby, we will be accompanied on a walking tour of the Dracula sites by members of the Whitby Dracula Experience Society and stop at their museum. Our stop in Whitby coincides with the annual Goth festival and tickets will be waiting for an evening of the best in contemporary Goth music.

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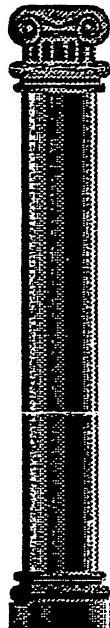
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**SEE REVERSE SIDE.**

## MASCARADA

MTV novella (with soundtrack) due out summer 96. A sequel to REMAINS OF THE DAY from DIAL 6.

The worst moment was when he knew he was silhouetted in the doorway, then he was through it, crouching behind a deck chair. Breath whooshed out of his lungs, his heart pumped wildly, his whole being charged with adrenalin. He had been out of the game too long, and terror was his only companion.

"That scumbag tabloid reporter, Jerry Lee, is writing an unauthorized biography called *Caitlin Davies: Fallen Role Model*. Rumor has it there are several chapters on Sonny Burnett."

"Gina!" The sound of her voice brought a flood of tears to his eyes. "Are you okay?" "Armando, don't do it." The phone must have been taken from her, because the hated voice came back on the line, chiding, yet snide. "The choice is yours, Armando. You know what I want."

Armando struck the side of Sonny's head with the flat of the gun, then gripped his neck, forcing him down. "Fuente is alive. He has taken my Gina and my son. For their safe return I must kill you."

"1998?" He stared at the piece of plastic in his hand. Florida driver's licenses expired after six years, which meant this license had been new in 1990. The last date Sonny remembered was November, 1988.

Stan said the word they had all been thinking but no one wanted to say: "Burnett." Trudy went pale and bit her lower lip. "Not again?" she begged.

"Sonny—" He was pulled up short as Stan seized him by the bicep, preventing him from passing. "Is he—?"

Trudy took his other arm and they led him to the other side of the houseboat.

"You're not going to like what we found," she told Rico, increasing his fear.

Blood spattered the outside wall of the houseboat, but there was no sign of a body.

Sonny whirled underneath the stairs to the second level. Twenty inches from his head, a shoe came down on a step, stealthily, and the second one as a man came down the stairs leading to the Gating gun. Sonny didn't have the time nor the room to aim and fire.

"I swear I won't print a word of it! I won't publish the book, there won't be a story, not a word, not a syllable about you. I didn't know. God, I didn't know!"

"And that's the problem," Sonny said with a wintry smile. "Now you do know."

"Trudy, my love." Rico took her by the hand and sat her down on the bed, looking at her as he spoke. "The Sonny Crockett we knew doesn't exist, at least not right now. Something made Sonny lose his memory again, and he's a different person."

And that's just the beginning...

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## Long Time Gone

A Miami Vice novel  
by  
Gretchen M. Cupp

A post-Freefall novel, with superb cover art by Hall and Jones  
Rating:R (Violence and Language)



**Domestic Price: \$25 pp. - Foreign: \$27 pp.**

Gretchen M. Cupp  
1666 Buena Vista Drive  
Yuba City, CA 95995

★ Previous Miami Vice stories and poetry have appeared in Bernay's Cafe, Crockett-Dial, Gold Coast, and Vice Verse I and II

# GOLD COAST #4

a MIAMI VICE fanzine

PATTERNS OF MEMORY by Tammy L. Croft — Images of days gone by surface for Lt. Castillo.

NEW BEGINNINGS by Whitney Armstrong — Sonny Crockett is alive and well and living in the Florida keys and trying to start a new life with a new lady and an old partner — Ricardo Tubbs. A post - "Freefall" story.

JACK BE NIMBLE by J Jones — Jack Crockett is star witness at the trial of a drug trafficker nicknamed "The Colonel". When he goes on the run the Crockett clan bands together to bring him back to testify.

THE DEATH OF SONNY T. BURNETT by Karen Howard — Jordy and Jesse Crockett are with Rainy Day Blues, a successful rock band, whose latest tour seems to be the victim of sabotage and embezzlement. When they arrive in Miami, Sonny, though no longer a cop, and OCB try to find out who is doing it and why.

145 pages of fine MV fiction. available now for \$15.00 U.S.  
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## CROCKETT DIAL (THAT'S ALLIGATOR, DARLIN', AL-LI-GATOR) #6

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**MTV COPS** by Mel Wallace (with help from Bunny T. Stoner)  
FIRST SEASON

Sonny Crockett stormed into the conference room at OCB and slammed the door hard enough to rattle the venetian blinds.

"No way, Mary!" he rasped. "I am not, repeat, NOT, babysitting some Hollywood pretty boy."

**IN TOO DEEDED** by J Jones  
SECOND SEASON

"Four months!" Sonny Crockett bellowed, pacing, hands alternately flying or jammed into his pants pockets. "Four months it took me to cultivate Linares, to get him to even consider dealing with Burnett, and some idiot blows the deal!"

**REMAINS O' THE DAY** by Toni Bain  
THIRD SEASON

The morgue always felt cold, and there was always a strange smell. Sonny and Rico both suppressed shudders as they entered what was commonly referred to as the "meat locker". Rows of stainless steel drawers lined the walls and behind each was a body. The medical examiner's assistant pulled out one drawer and unzipped the body bag.

**SO WE CAN SAY GOODBYE** by Lara Eirod  
FOURTH SEASON

Rico sat up, his eyes wide and staring at the foot of his bed. He couldn't be seeing what he was seeing— he still had to be asleep, dreaming he was awake. Caitlin Davies stood there real as life.

**TO PROTECT AND SERVE** by R Kayne  
FOURTH SEASON

He was a cop. The right thing to do was let the authorities handle the matter. He was a cop, sworn to protect and serve. He was also a man.

**DOWER TIDED** by Lara Eirod  
FIFTH SEASON

Celeste gasped when he broke the kiss.  
"This what you want, darlin'? Is it? Is this what you want?"  
Her breasts heaved, her eyes fixed on him. "...just want you."

**TWO LOST SOULS** by Lara Eirod  
FIFTH SEASON

Sonny sank down on the carpet. He did not even have the physical strength to stand. His legs trembled when he attempted to get up, then his whole body shook and the bottled up tears, the rage, the loneliness consumed him. Sonny Crockett rested his head on his knees and wept.

**I STILL BELIEVE** by R Kayne  
POST FREEFALL

Sonny Crockett could count the days. Forty days ago today he had thrown down his badge and told Castillo he was through. He held it together until his partner, Ricardo Tubbs, got on a plane to New York, then he had hit the bottle.

# GOLD COAST #5

a MIAMI VICE fanzine

BLIND CHANCE by Tammy L. Croft — Nick Parker and his daughter Mai arrive in Miami from SouthEast Asia and bring their family feud with Mai's uncle to the middle of an OCB case.

HORSESHOES AND HAND GRENADES by Gretchen M. Cupp — Crockett and Tubbs are ambushed on the St. Vitus Dance, Tubbs makes a big splash, and that's just the beginning of it. A first season story.

BY THE SWORD by Karen Howard & J Jones — while in Scotland clearing up Caitlin's estate, Crockett meets a man named Duncan McLeod who has some startling news for him. A MIAMI VICE/HIGHLANDER crossover.

art by j jones

Approximately 100 pages so far. Still accepting stories and art. What doesn't go in this issue will go in GOLD COAST # 6. SAE and loose stamps or IRCs for final prices and availability

from: Brenda Cunningham  
Box 123  
Assiniboia, Saskatchewan  
Canada S0H 0B0

## NIGHT DRIVING MUSIC by R Kayne POST FREEFALL

The road stretched ahead of him like a black, scaleless reptile with a broken white line tattooed down its spine. There were no other cars, no pedestrians: he was the only person inhabiting the planet.

## FOOL LIKE YOU by Karen Howard POST FREEFALL

Sonny waited for the next flash of lightning to illuminate the room, squinting so he wasn't blinded. He had a second, maybe two. He let the scene impress itself upon his retina, then assessed the after images. The back door was open and something was on the floor just inside. Sonny wanted another look, but couldn't risk it. His intuition told him what had happened, and he knew the last thing he should do was go down the stairs.

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## POETRY

Poems by Gretchen M. Cupp, Lara Eirod, R Kayne.

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## A TOUCH OF FOREVER

A "Forever Knight" zine

**COVER ART:** LaCroix, by Bea Lawlor

**COMMON GROUND** takes a look at the eternal struggle to find your footing in a new relationship. Tracy Vetter is intrigued by her new vampire friend, but can she find something to share with the enigmatic Vachon? by Marg Baskin

**THE CALLER** has captured LaCroix's imagination and made him dream again, but what does she want from the mysterious vampire master? by Denysé M. Bridger

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# *Email Discussion Loop For "Good Guy" Vampires!*

*Drop me an email note if you'd like to join a discussion loop about the stories in this issue, and about "good guy" vampires in books, film and tv. If enough folks are interested, we'll see what we can get going.*

*MaryAnnMc@aol.com, editor*

*Good Guys Wear Fangs*



# **Help Save KINDRED!!!**

Write to FOX and tell them that you would like to see it return as a mid-season replacement:

Mr. John Matoian  
President of Programming  
Fox Broadcasting Company  
P.O. Box 900  
Beverly Hills, CA 90213-0900

[kindred@segi-mail.com](mailto:kindred@segi-mail.com)

AND

Write to the producer, Aaron Spelling, asking him to look for a new home for Kindred in syndication or with another network if FOX is not interested. He can be reached at:

Mr. Aaron Spelling  
Fox Broadcasting Company  
P.O. Box 900  
Beverly Hills, CA 90213-0900

Be polite, and don't mention any sort of letter-writing campaign, but it might be appropriate to point out how it takes time for a show such as this one to find its audience (*How many of your friends didn't think they'd like it, but did when they tripped over it, or you insisted they watch?*) Another point to mention: the incredibly fast growth of *Kindred* fandom as a support for the show -- the email list already has approximately 150 members, there is already a newsgroup on the nets, and there is already a panel to discuss the show at this Media West Con!

(For information on joining the Kindred email list, please send email to  
[MaryAnnMc@aol.com.](mailto:MaryAnnMc@aol.com))

**KINDRED stories, poems, and art  
particularly wanted!!!**

**"Good Guys Wear Fangs!"**

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\* ART, POETRY, AND FICTION SOUGHT \*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*

Do YOU have a favorite good guy vampire?

Possibilities include MICHAEL PRAED's new video release "To Die For II: Son of Darkness," "To Die For," starring Brenden Hughes, "Blood Ties" (FOX's series pilot about an extended family of vampires in present day California), "Subspecies" (available on video), and "Nick Knight." "Dark Shadows" stories will also be considered, particularly if they focus on Barnabus's striving to retain his humanity, or romantic stories in which his plight actually has a happy ending. (I prefer the Ben Cross version.)

Crossover stories with your favorite series are also welcomed. For example, how would Stingray or Robin Hood handle the situation if either of them suddenly woke to find himself a vampire? What if Starman met a vampire who was as different and special as he was himself?

Or be completely original and create all your own characters.

Almost anything goes as long as there is at least one vampire in the story striving to maintain his (or her) humanity and basically be a moral person, although I personally tend to shy away from horror and go for upbeat endings.

If you have an idea, write and send a SASE, or send a SASE for notification of availability.

**Contact:**

MaryAnn B. McKinnon, editor  
254 Blunk Ave.  
Plymouth, MI 48170

email=MaryAnnMc@aol.com

# HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS

Examples from the movies and television that demonstrate mood or atmosphere of the types of stories I'm looking for:

FROM THE MOVIES:

- "Heaven Can Wait"
- "Chances Are"
- "Heavenly Kid"
- "Made in Heaven"
- "Here Comes Mr. Jordan"
- "Portrait of Jenny"
- "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir"
- "Somewhere in Time"
- "Always"
- "It's a Wonderful Life"
- "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever"
- "Topper"
- "Defending Your Life"
- "High Plains Drifter"
- "Somewhere Tomorrow"

TV

FROM TELEVISION:

- "Highway to Heaven"
- "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir"
- "MacGyver" episode in which Mac leaves his body in a near-death experience; episode in which he goes back in time to the Old West in a dream, is killed in that dream, and wakes up to find the lucky pocket knife from the dream in his pocket!
- "Magnum PI" next-to-last season finale in which Magnum has a near-death experience and really thinks he's dead; another episode shows the return of his friend Mac who had previously died; Magnum falls in love with a girl long dead.
- Selected "Moonlighting" episodes
- "The Two Worlds of Jenny Logan" (TV movie available on video)
- "The Hanged Man" (TV movie)
- "Paradise" episode in which The Grim Reaper comes to town seeking Ethan, but it seems that a higher power may have decided that it's not quite time for him to die.
- "Beauty and the Beast": Catherine has a near-death experience when she almost drowns in the trunk of her car; Catherine is visited by her father after his death.
- "Wiseguy" episode in which Vinnie makes the bells ring and McPike pulls out of his coma.

As the examples show, I'm looking for upbeat stories about near-death experiences, reincarnation, friends or loved-ones who come back as helpful ghosts, guardian angels who are trying to redeem a not-quite perfect life, small miracles that punctuate everyday life, ghostly or mystical displacement in time, or love stories with a beautiful but haunting quality. No horror, but harder-edged stories (particularly western) will be considered on an individual basis.

Apply these themes to your favorite fandom, or write an entirely original story. I would particularly like to see the hero of another fandom have a near-death experience similar to MacGyver's or Magnum's (Perhaps Vinnie, Hutch, McCall, Sonny, or Vincent?). Or perhaps one of our heroes could fall in love with someone who is really a ghost or somehow displaced in time. Here, too, is a perfect opportunity if there are any "Highway to Heaven" fans out there.

Use your imagination and let me hear from you!

Also seeking stories from the short-lived USA cable series MATRIX, starring Nick Mancuso.

Contact: Mary Ann B. McKinnon  
254 Blunk Avenue  
Plymouth, MI. 48170

(All world views welcome, whether Christian, American Indian, Buddhist, Jewish, or something else entirely.)

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# IMMORTAL TALES #1

**1994 Fan Q  
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Highlander  
Zine!**

*Edited by: Mary Ann B. McKinnon*

*Beyond the Darkness, by Jackie Paciello  
(Missing events from "The Darkness" . . .)*

*"Is There Something You Want to Tell Me?" by Richard Carter Jr  
(Duncan and Tessa in the beginning . . .)*

*"Lightning Strikes," by Julie Beamer  
(The widow of an Immortal needs Duncan's help . . .)*

*All the Good Women, by Jane Freitag  
(Connor remembers them all . . .)*

*"The Selection," by D.J. Domin  
(Joe Dawson and a very special new Watcher . . .)*

*"High Barbaree," by Susan Rock  
(Duncan and Amanda on the Barbary Coast . . .)*

*"Reunion," by Denysé Bridger  
(Duncan drops in on Connor and his new love . . .)*

*"Steel Butterflies," by Tammy Croft  
(Ramirez, a young Japanese princess, and a very special sword . . .)*

*"Little Ones," by Cheryl Warkentin  
(An old adversary, a kidnapped child . . .)*

*"Sacrifice Gambit," by David F. Wall  
(Richie is on the run from a very powerful Immortal . . . Will Mac help him?)*

*"End Game," by Mary Ann B. McKinnon  
(Connor, Duncan and Tessa in Seattle and New York, 1985 . . .)*

*"The Uninitiated," by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn  
(A beautiful and mysterious lady, a newly-discovered Immortal . . .)*

*"No Way Out," by Marg Baskin, p. 169  
(A plane crash, a school friend of Tessa's, and a stalking stranger after both women . . .)*

*Beautiful Color Cover of Duncan and Tessa by Michele West  
Interior Art by Michele West, Chris Angelucci, Todd Parrish, and Peggy Spalding*

*Poets include: Denysé Bridger, Kathleen Y. Bergeron, and Jane Freitag*

*Approximately 220 pages*

*\**

*Available from: Bill Hupe at the Media West Con Orphan Zine Table for \$16.00, or order from him at 916 Lamb Rd, Mason, Mi. 448854 for \$17.00 bookrate. Send submissions to: Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 254 Blunk, Plymouth, Mi. 48170, email = MaryAnnMc@aol.com*

*Coming in June 1994!*

# IMMORTAL TALES #2

*Chasing the Heart*, by Linda Mooney  
(Duncan and Tessa been together just a year . . .)

*"Endings and Beginnings,"* by Jane Freitag  
(Missing events from "The Darkness" . . .)

*Two Left*, by Richard Carter Jr  
(A very special Quickening . . .)

*And the Goths Come Marching in*, by Susan Rock  
(Darius at the gates of Rome . . .)

*Bushido of the Immortal*, by Rick Carter  
(Ramirez in ancient Japan . . .)

*The Rules of the Game*, by Debbie Domin  
(A young Joe Dawson, and an assignment that will change him forever . . .)

*"A Kind of Magic,"* by Jane Freitag  
(Connor and Rachel in World War II . . .)

*"Surge of Power,"* by B. Janis Roth  
(An escaped Quickening, a deathly ill Duncan MacLeod . . .)

*"The Reunion,"* by Terry Lyons  
(Connor, Duncan, and Connor's other protégée . . .)

*"The Darkness Before Dawn,"* by Mary Ann B. McKinnon  
(Duncan and Richie and the final battle for the Prize . . .)

*"A Time for Tears,"* by Jenni Simpson  
(Tessa is dead, and Duncan has gone to New Orleans to find her killer . . .)

*"Prophecy of the Spear,"* a novella by Jason Elsworth (80pp + 4pp art = 84pp)  
(When an old World War II Special Forces comrade of Duncan's shows up asking for help in freeing his grandson from the influence of neo-Nazis, Mac, Richie and Tessa pitch in. What Duncan little suspects, however, is that this is only the tip of the iceberg, and the immortal Fourth Reich is at hand . . . )

Poetry by Denysé Bridger, Lisa Savignano, Valerie Meachum, and Tammy Croft.  
Color cover of Duncan MacLeod by award winning artist Frances Quinn.  
Interior art by Michele West, Chris Angelucci, and others.

Edited by: Mary Ann B. McKinnon

Available at the Orphan Zine Table from Bill Hupe, or order from him at 916 Lamb Rd., Footrot Flats, Mason, Mi. 48854, 200+ pages, \$16.00 plus postage.

Submissions for #3 to: Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 254 Blunk,  
Plymouth, Mi. 48170, email = [MaryAnnMc@aol.com](mailto:MaryAnnMc@aol.com)

# Z: The Zorro Zine

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